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The Epiphone Bible

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- Star interviews
- The history of Epiphone
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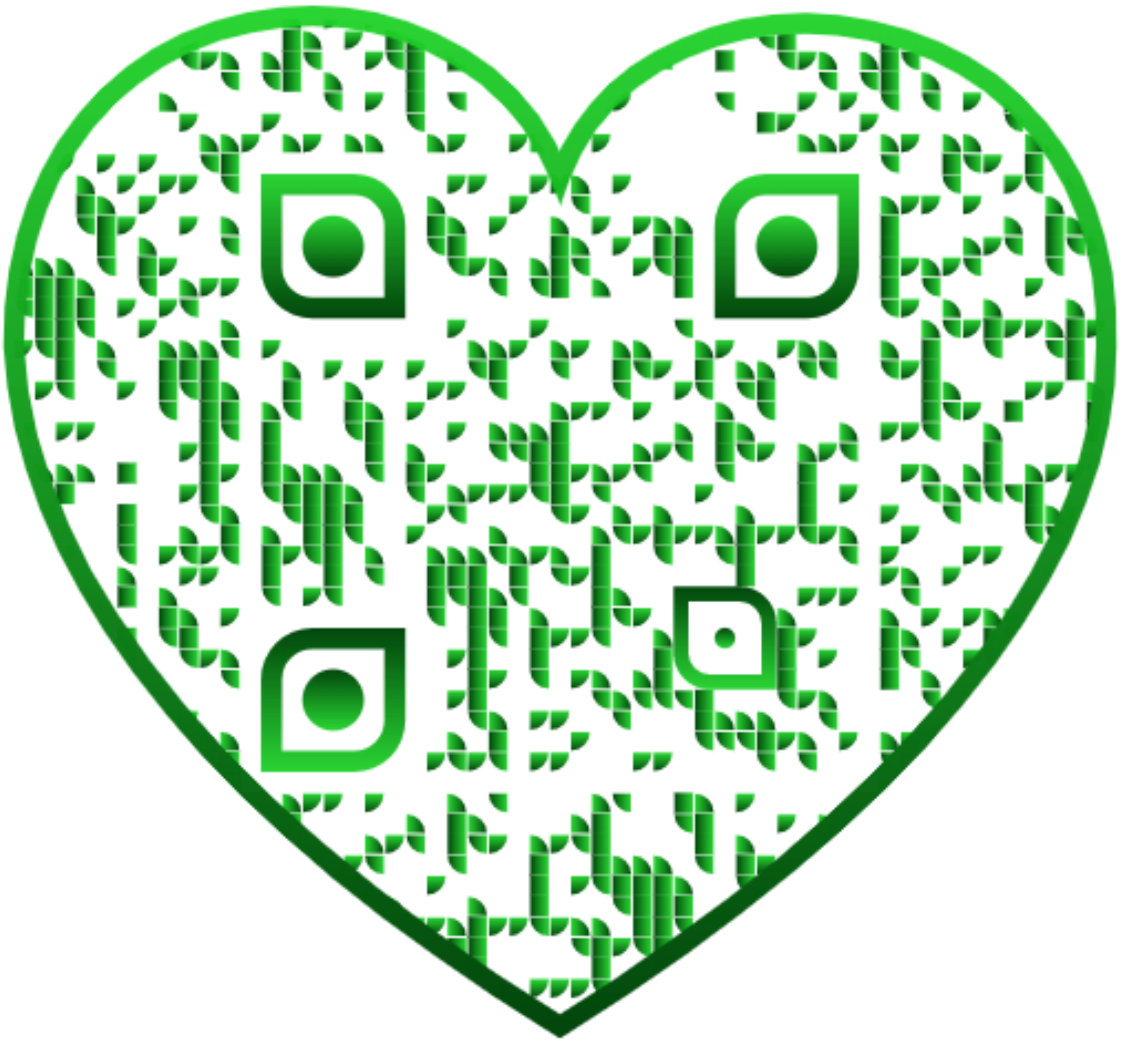

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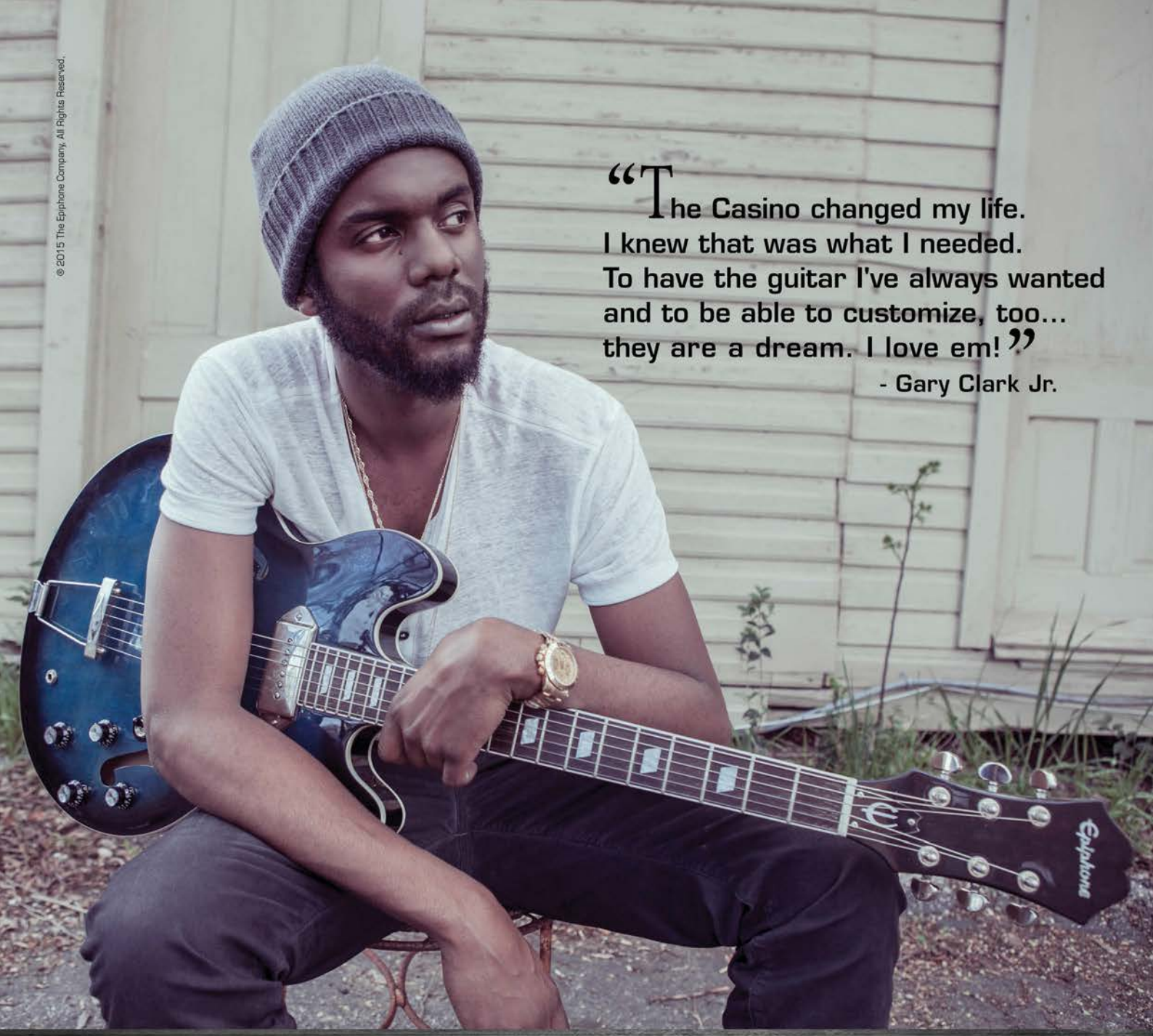

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History Makers

Here at *G&B*, we're no strangers to busting preconceptions and here's a big one for ya: Epiphone isn't just some Gibson sub-brand that simply pumps out entry-level versions of the Big G's iconic designs, it's a company with a rich heritage of its own that was once Gibson's fierce rival in the world of electrified archtop guitars and much more besides.

In the years that followed Gibson's acquisition of the company, the very biggest names in pop – John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison and Keith Richards, to name just four geniuses – made history and established a whole new vocabulary for popular music with Epiphone instruments.

Today, a new breed of stars, from contemporary metalheads such as Trivium's Matt Heafy and Brent Hinds to modern blues-rock standard bearer Gary Clark Jr cite Epiphone as their brand of choice. Across the following pages, we explore the history of the company and bring it bang up to date with in-depth reviews of new-for-2016 models launched at Summer NAMM in June.

Before I sign off, special thanks go out to Rod Brakes and Vintage 'N' Rare Guitars in Bath, UK (vintageandrareguitars.com) for the loan of the fabulous – and fabulously rare – 1961 Casino in Royal Olive that graces the cover. See it in forensic detail and read all about it on p90.

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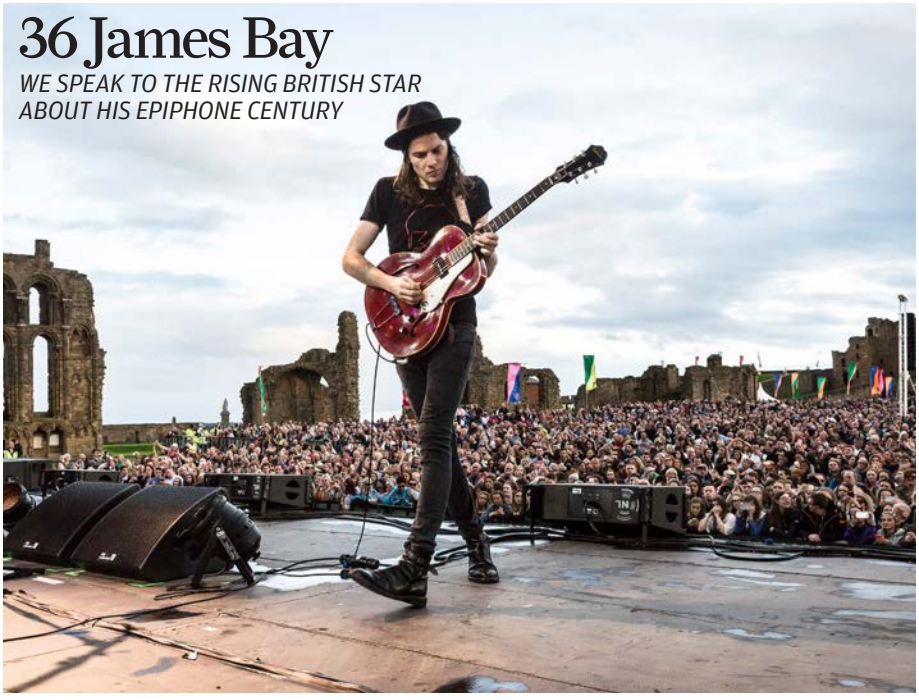

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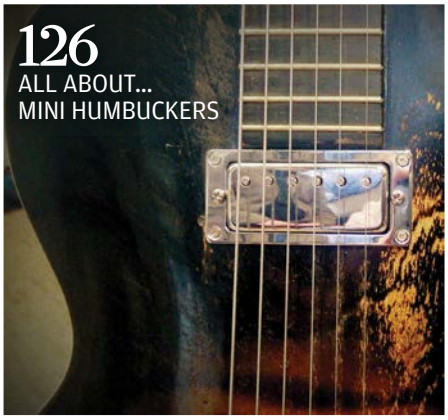

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Past Masters

From the Jazz Era to The Beatles and beyond, Epiphone guitars have long been a desirable proposition for players. Here, we chart the illustrious history of a proud marque that has always represented playability, value and style

Guitar brands have always had auras. Gibson? Solid, reliable, professional. Gretsch? Glamorous and more than just a weeny bit mad and unhinged. Guild? Good, respected, but never a Gibson. And Epiphone? Based on its 60s reputation with guitars such as the Coronet, Wilshire, Casino and Riviera, Epiphones are much like Gibsons – obviously, because Gibson made them at the time – and yet different, alternative, perhaps more individual-minded, and to some, possibly just that tiny bit cooler...

In truth, that same aura existed back in the 1930s, when Epiphone was an independent entity. Transport yourself back to that time, and you'd probably have been a fan of hot, swinging jazz, the rock 'n' roll of the age, and you'd have known that Joe Pass, Bucky Pizzarelli, George Van Eps, Oscar Moore and Freddie Greene all played Epiphones. Gibsons came from Michigan; Epiphones were built in New York, the centre of the jazz world, and its Masterbilt archtops were beautiful, charismatic and often audaciously loud.

This was the time of the steel-string guitar's first great boom period. As the 1920s faded into the 30s, the banjo and the mandolin were supplanted by the Spanish guitar, the Hawaiian guitar and that odd banjo/guitar crossover, the tenor guitar. For any instrument company of the time, keeping on top of this new six-string trend was vital – and Epiphone was the one that managed it best.

> Joe Pass, Bucky Pizzarelli, George Van Eps, Oscar Moore,Freddie Greene – all played Epiphones

Epiphone joins the Jazz Age

The company has its origins in Sparta, Greece, with Anastasios Stathopoulo, a maker of violins and lutes who moved to New York in 1903. His son Epaminondas 'Epi' Stathopoulo took over after his father's death in 1915, and by 1928, he had changed the name of the company from House Of Stathopoulo to Epiphone – 'Epi' from his nickname, and 'phone' from the Greek word for 'sound' – to concentrate on the new craze, banjos. Epiphone's first bid for the guitar market was the Recording series of round-hole models with flat or arched tops, ornate banjo-style headstocks and futuristic cutaway bodies. >

The Epiphone 'Revolution': a tribute to John Lennon's fave Casino guitar

Photo courtesy of Gibson

Gibson, despite its flowery advertisements, did not have the same grip on the guitar market that it had exerted over the mandolin scene in the teens and 20s. It had notably failed to exploit the work of Lloyd Loar, the man who had invented a whole new family of f-hole instruments for the company, including the genre-defining L-5 archtop. Frustrated, Loar quit the company in 1924. Gibson was even making wooden children's toys when, in 1931, Epiphone took the company completely by surprise by bringing out not just one archtop to compete with Loar's still-surviving L-5, but an entire range of seven six-string f-hole archtops, several tenors and two flat-tops, all under the proud 'Masterbilt' banner.

Stung into action, Gibson began to launch new guitars. This was the beginning of an intense rivalry between the two factories that would simmer for two decades. The top jazz and dance-band guitarists of the day would compare Epiphones to Gibsons and, as often or not, they went for the upstart newcomer. Where Gibson's 1930s guitars had plain

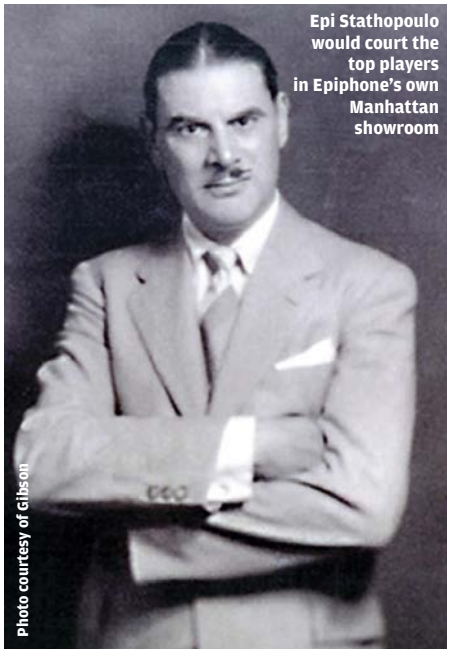

Epi Stathopoulo would court the top players in Epiphone's own Manhattan showroom

Photo courtesy of Gibson

Guitarist Oscar Moore, with the Nat King Cole Trio, was just one of many influential Epiphone users in the 1930s

Photo: Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images

Where Gibsons had plain model numbers, Epiphone guitars had charismatic names – De Luxe, Broadway, Zenith, Triumph...

model numbers, Epiphones had charismatic names such as De Luxe, Broadway, Windsor, Tudor, Zenith and Triumph; the most expensive models had stylish headstocks with 'side parting' profiles, stunning 'wandering vine' headstock inlays, fingerboard markers shaped like exotic diamonds, clouds or flowers and, a little later, fancy two-piece 'Frequensator' tailpieces. When Gibson brought out its new so-called 'Advanced' wide bodies, Epiphone trumped it by upping its own sizes and by out-glamming the flagship Super 400 with a guitar a full 3/8-inch wider: the spectacular Emperor.

Both companies hurried to the electric lap steel and amp market in 1935. Epiphone salesman Herb Sunshine developed a pickup with adjustable polepieces in 1937; Gibson was unable to follow suit until 1940. On the other hand, Gibson's first pickup, later nicknamed the Charlie Christian and fitted to its lap steels and the ES-150 electric archtop, sounded superb, whereas Epiphone's pickups were sometimes weak and underwound. The company ran foul of a Rickenbacker patent, forcing it to halt production of its fine horseshoe-magnet lap-steel pickups by 1938, and then joined forces with Meissner Inventions of New Jersey, the holder of a magnet-pickup patent that many other companies chose to ignore.

The battle raged back and forth. Gibson and Epiphone both launched amplifier sets to match their electric guitars, but it was Epiphone that produced the first-ever outboard guitar effect, the Rocco Tone Expressor tone/volume pedal, in 1937, and the world's first guitar-mounted 'stacked' volume/tone control in 1941. Gibsons had boasted an adjustable truss rod since 1922; Epiphone would not budge from the non-adjustable rod until 1939. That same year, Epiphone debuted slick blonde finishes on its acoustic archtops; Gibson countered with its own blonde finishes, plus stylish cutaways. Most daringly of all, Epiphone responded to Gibson's grandiose slogan 'Only A Gibson Is Good Enough' with its own: 'When Good Enough Isn't Good Enough'.

During WW2, all guitar companies joined the war effort, and Epiphone made aircraft parts. However, the company received a body blow in 1943 with the death of Epi Stathopoulo from leukaemia, and after the

EPIPHONE TIMELINE

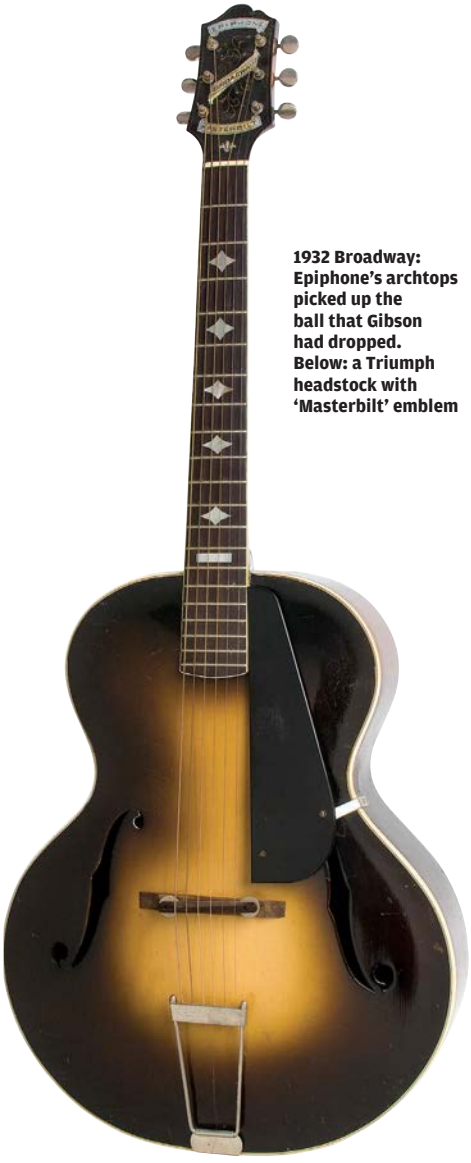
1928
Epi makes its first acoustic guitars in New York

1931
Epi makes its first archtops in New York

1935
Epiphone Emperor takes the prize for size and glamour

1937
First-ever pickup with adjustable polepieces

1930 Recording Model D: Epiphone's first guitars of 1928 showed ornate banjo-type styling; they lasted just three years



1932 Broadway: Epiphone's archtops picked up the ball that Gibson had dropped. Below: a Triumph headstock with 'Masterbilt' emblem

1934 Tudor: one step below the De Luxe, and very rare. At this stage, Epi archtops still had 'segmented' f-holes

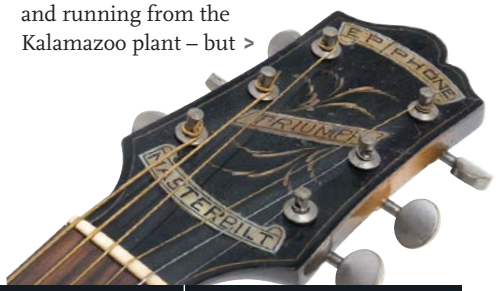
war, Epi's two brothers, Orphie and Frixo, took over as instrument production resumed. Epiphone stole yet another march on Gibson with a luxurious electrified cutaway archtop, the Zephyr Deluxe Regent, but the brothers lacked the ability to work effectively together; and though the company was still respected and had many 'name' followers – even Les Paul played one – it was by this time on shaky ground.

Frixo sold all his stock in 1948, and in 1952, Orphie traded distribution rights to CG Conn, known for its brass and orchestral lines. Conn partially moved production to Philadelphia, losing many skilled workers to a new company, Guild. Ironically, Guild and Gretsch both bought machinery from the struggling Epiphone: these two would soon be jumping into the gap left by the New York company. Orphie regained control in 1954 and, for a short while, the company seemed to find its feet. The brothers made their peace in 1956, but it was too late: quality and sales were down, and it looked as if Epiphone would go the way of so many other great pre-war US guitar makers.

Gibson takes over

When Gibson's Ted McCarty received a call from Orphie in 1957 offering all the dies and tooling for Epiphone's popular upright basses, he decided to investigate. If McCarty was surprised that the price was just $20,000 – compare that with the $13,000,000 that the fashionable, profitable Fender company would cost CBS only eight years later – then he was amazed to find out that the deal also included all the tooling for the guitar lines and a mountain of unused guitar parts. The sale was made: finally, Gibson had swallowed its main competition whole.

The changeover was not without problems. A deliberate fire sparked by a disgruntled employee put paid to a huge quantity of guitars and parts. McCarty had to pump in a lot of money to get Epiphone up and running from the Kalamazoo plant – but >



1957
Gibson buys Epiphone

1960
Epiphones now made in Kalamazoo

1970
Production is moved to Japan

1983
Korean factory Samick makes all Epiphones

1995
US guitars such as the Lennon Casino return again

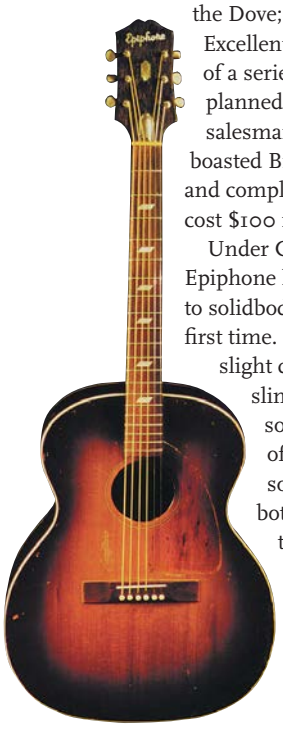
The price of $20,000 included all the tooling for Epiphone guitars and a mountain of guitar parts

it was worth it, because the acquisition of the name crucially gave Gibson the chance to circumvent its own strict dealer rules and sell guitars, in the sales parlance of the time, 'down both sides of the street'. This would open the door for massive Epiphone sales in the 60s, including in the UK, where the brand held a particular appeal.

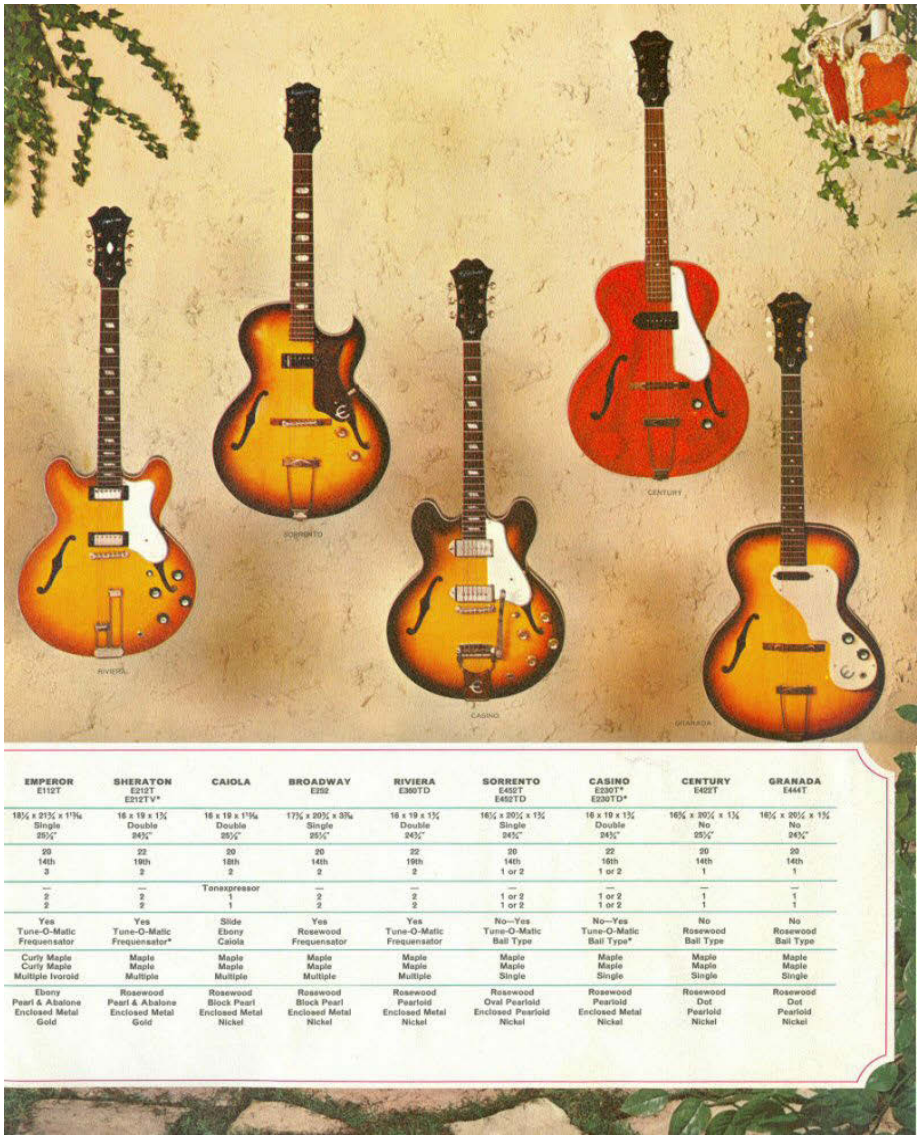
By 1958, Gibson had begun to put in place an all-new range cleverly designed to echo Gibson's own electric and acoustic lines, and by 1960, Epiphone production was fully in-house. Soon, the ES-330, 335 and 355 were matched by the Epiphone Casino, Riviera and Sheraton, the latter two with mini-humbuckers to subtly downgrade them from the G-branded flagships (these clear, sharp-sounding pickups were designed by Seth Lover and would later find a home on the Les Paul Deluxe).

The popular ES-125 family was shadowed by the Epiphone Granada, Century, Sorrento and Windsor. For basses, Gibson's EB-2 was partnered by the Rivoli, with the Newport and Thunderbird for solidbody company. In the acoustic flat-top field, the Caballero followed the LG-0, and the Cortez matched the LG-2; the Epiphone Texan lost its cool 50s shape and was re-jigged to resemble the J-45; the Frontier became a dreadnought with a 'rope and cactus' pickguard to approximate the Dove; and the fabulous Excellente dreadnought – one of a series of E-prefix names planned by maverick Epi salesman, Andy Nelson – boasted Brazilian rosewood and complex inlays and actually cost $100 more than the J-200.

Under Gibson, the Epiphone label was applied to solidbody electrics for the first time. Intended to be slight downgrades, with slimmer bodies, the Epi solids had a flavour of their own and soon won fans. At the bottom of the heap, the Olympic aped the skinny-pickup student-grade



The FT-79 flat-top ran from 1941 until the Gibson takeover in 1957



EMPEROR E112T	SHERATON E212T E212TV*	CAIOLA	BROADWAY E252	RIVIERA E360TD	SORRENTO E452T E452TD	CASINO E230T* E230TD*	CENTURY E422T	GRANADA E444T
18⅛ x 21⅜ x 1⅞ Single 25½"	16 x 19 x 1⅜ Double 24½"	16 x 19 x 1⅞ Double 25½"	17⅜ x 20⅜ x 3⅜ Single 25½"	16 x 19 x 1⅜ Double 24½"	16½ x 20½ x 1⅜ Single 24½"	16 x 19 x 1⅜ Double 24½"	16½ x 20½ x 1¾ No 25½"	16½ x 20½ x 1⅜ No 24½"
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— 2 2	— 2 2	Tonexpressor 1 1	— 2 2	— 2 2	— 1 or 2 1 or 2	— 1 or 2 1 or 2	— 1 1	— 1 1
Yes Tune-O-Matic Frequensator	Yes Tune-O-Matic Frequensator*	Slide Ebony Caiola	Yes Rosewood Frequensator	Yes Tune-O-Matic Frequensator	No—Yes Tune-O-Matic Ball Type	No—Yes Tune-O-Matic Ball Type*	No Rosewood Ball Type	No Rosewood Ball Type
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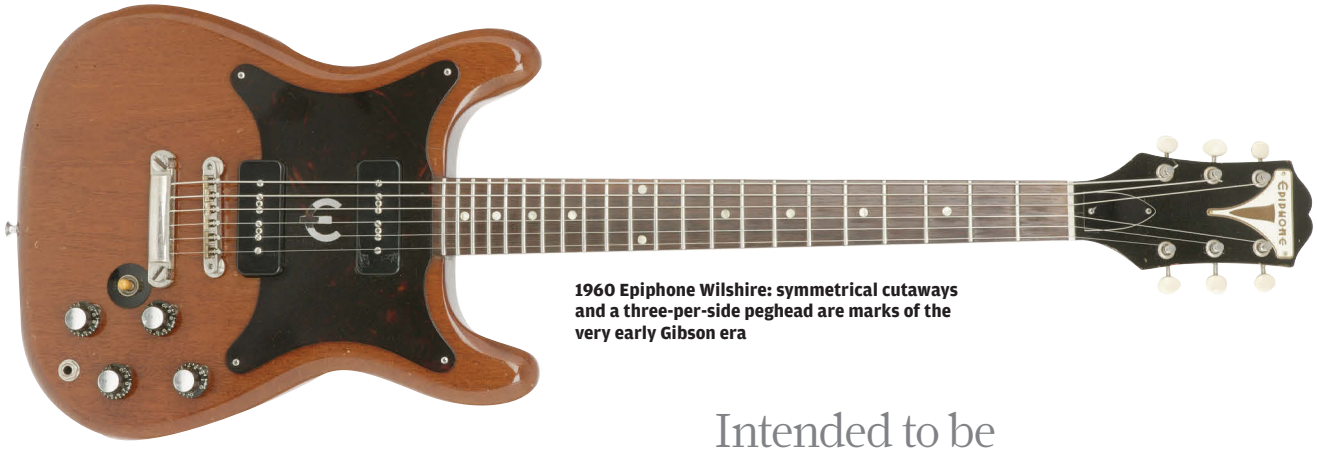
Ebony Pearl & Abalone Enclosed Metal Gold	Rosewood Pearl & Abalone Enclosed Metal Gold	Rosewood Block Pearl Enclosed Metal Nickel	Rosewood Block Pearl Enclosed Metal Nickel	Rosewood Pearloid Enclosed Metal Nickel	Rosewood Oval Pearloid Enclosed Pearloid Nickel	Rosewood Pearloid Enclosed Metal Nickel	Rosewood Dot Pearloid Nickel	Rosewood Dot Pearloid Nickel

Photo courtesy of Gibson

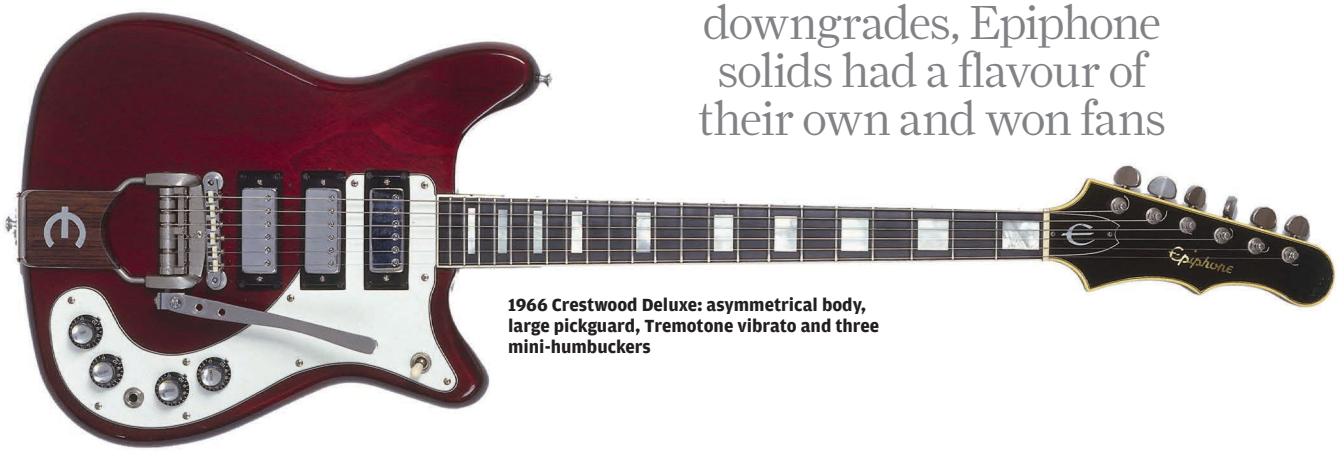
1951 Zephyr De Luxe Regent: last gasp for the Epi archtop. Note the Tone Spectrum pickups and Frequensator tailpiece

1965 Broadway: the same guitar now 'Gibsonised' with mini-humbuckers, a new headstock and Gibson-type controls

Photo: Dorling Kindersley



1960 Epiphone Wilshire: symmetrical cutaways and a three-per-side peghead are marks of the very early Gibson era



1966 Crestwood Deluxe: asymmetrical body, large pickguard, Tremotone vibrato and three mini-humbuckers

Intended to be downgrades, Epiphone solids had a flavour of their own and won fans

Melody Maker. Moving up, the fine single-pickup Coronet (launched, like several late-50s Epiphones, with leftover supplies of the company's old Tone Spectrum or 'New York' pickups before gaining a P-90) was an alternative to the Les Paul Junior. The Wilshire model understudied the SG, with P-90s and a small pickguard later changed to a swooping 60s 'guard and mini-humbuckers, while the top-of-the-line Crestwood Deluxe and Custom added glam fingerboard inlays and cool finish options. Four new amps also appeared – all Gibsons under the skin, but called the Epiphone Devon, Century, Zephyr and Emperor.

Some models trod their own unique path. Under Epiphone, Gibson first launched square-shoulder dreads, double-cutaway solids and even a piezo-bridge classical, the Seville. The jazzy Zephyr and three-pickup Emperor kept their pre-Gibson body outlines, but became thinner bodied. Three signature guitars for Al Caiola provided upgrades to the fully-hollow thinline format, while the Professional was a single-pickup thinline semi with the controls for the matching amplifier mounted on the guitar itself – a very brave idea, if not one that prospered.

Finally, the Howard Roberts was an oval-hole electric archtop designed for the renowned studio pro. Built from '64 until '69, the Howard Roberts was considered too good to lose and would be reissued as part of the Gibson line in 1974.

The fall of Epiphone

The year 1970 marked the start of a bad period. Epiphone was not fully supported by some elements at Gibson, and production was moved to Japan.

"At Gibson, Epiphone was viewed as the newcomer – the red-headed stepchild," confirms Epiphone's present-day President, Jim Rosenberg. "Epiphone sales peaked around 1967, but then fell away badly. With pressure from Far East imports, Gibson had to compete at that price-point.

"It was a logical strategy – keep Gibson as the US-made brand, make Epiphone the imported line. There was no way they were going to send the Gibson name over there. They said, 'Let's send Epiphone. Let's just get them out of here'."

At this stage, Japan was not capable of the high-level replicas that would arrive in the 80s, and the new imports all had bolt-on necks. While the 70s ET-290 looked much like a mid-60s Wilshire from a distance, in that it had full-sized humbuckers; and thinline semi-acoustics such as the EA-250 bore no resemblance to any US-made model. It was the lowest point in Epiphone's history.

In the mid-to-late 70s, the Matsumoku factory made three Scroll models with German-carved solidbodies and hooked upper horns – not a popular line. The Pearl factory in Taiwan was the source of some of the Genesis solidbodies in '79 to '80, while Terada came into play in 1982 with a decent re-run of the Casino, Riviera, Sheraton and Emperor, this time with set necks, setting a standard that Epis of the rest of the decade would not follow. Terada still makes the Epiphone Elitist line today.

The year 1982 also saw an odd blip on the chart with the release of the US-made >

EPIPHONE PLAYERS

JOHN LENNON
Lennon bought his ES-230TD Casino, originally sunburst, in 1965 and he used it as his main stage guitar until the end of his life

PAUL McCARTNEY
In 1964, Macca purchased a Casino and a Texan acoustic. The Casino was a hit: "If I had to choose one electric guitar," he said, "it would be this"

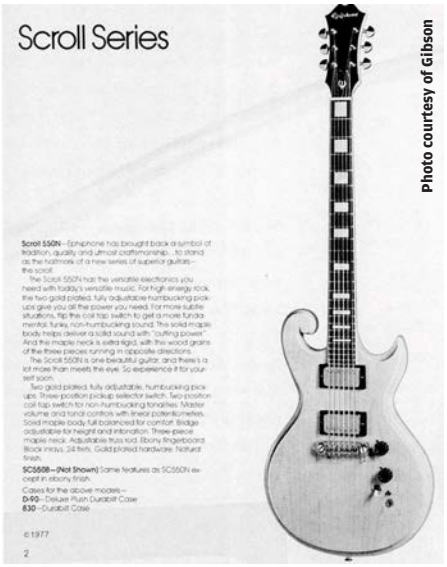
JOHN LEE HOOKER
Received his first Epi as a gift from T-Bone Walker. Used several models, from a '59 two-pickup Zephyr archtop to a Sheraton

JOE PASS
The jazz great's Emperor endorsement in the 1990s added great weight to the reputation of current imported Epiphone archtops

DJANGO REINHARDT
A Selmer addict, Django acquired a new Epiphone Zephyr model on a visit to the USA in 1946 and played it with Duke Ellington

They also served: Paul Weller (Casino), Noel Gallagher (Riviera, Casino), Steve Marriott (Dwight-brand Coronet), Roy Orbison (Bard 12-string), Keith Richards (Casino), Pete Doherty (Coronet), Zakk Wylde (Les Paul), Steve Earle (Casino), Nick Valensi (Riviera P94) and others

Photos, top to bottom: Courtesy of Gibson, Corbis, Michael Ochs Archives/Corbis, Sipa Press / Rex Features, Michael Ochs Archives/Corbis



SIX CLASSIC EPIPHONE GUITARS

1930s De Luxe
A poem in carved maple and spruce, with delicious inlays, the De Luxe was top of the line until the launch of the Emperor

Mid-60s Excellente
A gloriously over-the-top dreadnought for the rhinestone market. If Gibson had stuck to the old round-shoulder shape and kept a check on those skinny necks, these might be some of the most desirable Gibson-made flat-tops today

Mid-50s Zephyr Regent Emperor
In the 1950s, 'Zephyr' meant electric, 'Regent' meant cutaway. The three-pickup Emperor had a questionable six-push-button pickup-selector system, but the guitar was still a challenge to Gibson's three-pickup Switchmaster

Early-60s Casino
Not the most original Epi – it's a Gibson 330 with a five-ply body, later tweaked with a sexy headstock, nylon saddles and parallelogram markers – but the Casino has a charm and charisma all its own, and P-90s always sound fantastic

Late-50s Coronet
Symmetrical slab body, very close to a double-cut Fender Esquire – and if you've never tried the underrated 'New York' pickups, then you really should... they can be total monsters. Reissue, please!

2009 '1962' Crestwood
This reissue of an Epiphone electric rarity marked a welcome return for USA solidbody manufacture.

1971 5102T: made by Matsumoku, Japan. Cut back to just 13 models, the 1971 range was a sad shadow of former glories

Photo: Rob Wesley/www.robwesley.com

The three mid-70s Scroll models had German-carved solid bodies and hooked upper horns. They weren't a popular line

American Series – built, strangely, in the near-abandoned factory in Kalamazoo, as by this time, Norlin-owned Gibson had shifted most of its production from Michigan to Nashville. The Epiphone Spirit I and II had shapes akin to the double-cut Les Paul Jr, the Special was loosely related to the Gibson SG, and the Epiphone Map was a USA-shaped promo special that caused skywards-shooting eyebrows at NAMM. By 1983, all these had been absorbed into the Gibson line – some, it's said, with the Epiphone logo faintly visible beneath 'Gibson' on their headstocks.

By 1984, all production had left Kalamazoo, Epiphone's home under the Gibson umbrella for 24 years, leaving the historic factory to be taken over by the Heritage guitar company. Korea was the next port of call, and for the rest of the 80s and into the early 90s, Aria in Japan began making the carved-top guitars while Samick turned out a mass of 'Epiphone by Gibson' models, some tipping the hat to PRS or Gibson's Flying V and Explorer, others shamelessly aping Fender's Stratocaster and Precision, but with droopy Explorer headstocks. Sales were up – but there was a long way to go.

A new beginning

Jim Rosenberg was appointed Epiphone Product Manager by Gibson's new top brass, Henry Juszkiewicz and Dave Berryman, in 1992. "When I started, containers of guitars would arrive and you'd never know if it was going to be a good day or a bad day," Rosenberg chuckles. "There was no real quality inspection at all. There were piles of instruments sitting there for months or years – they weren't good enough to ship, but no-one would throw them away."

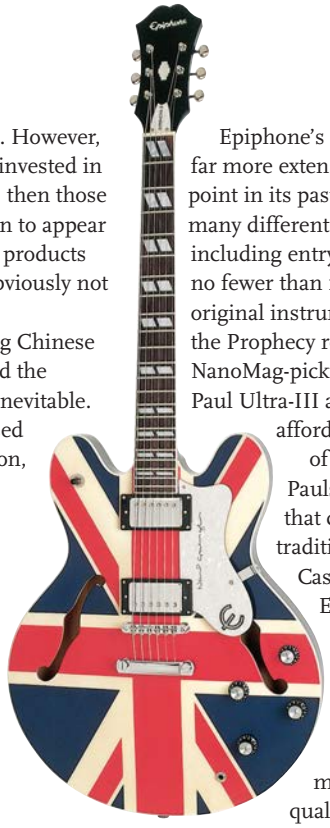
Rosenberg's first task was to organise quality control, both at source and in the USA. Working closely with Berryman, Rosenberg set up an office in Korea, hired quality inspectors, and set about expanding Epiphone's offshore manufacturing base from Samick, Cort and Peerless out to other, smaller companies. "We started drilling down and finding out who the individual suppliers were," he explains. "You see, with a big company like Samick, they'd take, for instance, an order for some entry-level acoustics, but if they were busy, they'd simply contract it out. Equally, we began finding the people who actually made the hardware, the pickups, the plastic parts. We've kept some of those relationships going since 1992." There were also steps towards a new US-made line with a limited Gibson-produced Riviera/Sheraton range and a run of classic Epiphone acoustics from Gibson in Montana.

This refreshed strategy began to draw in new Korean factories such as Unsung and

Saein, and quality began to rise. However, it was noticed that if Epiphone invested in special parts or body templates, then those features would sometimes begin to appear on certain factories' own-brand products soon afterwards – which was obviously not an ideal situation.

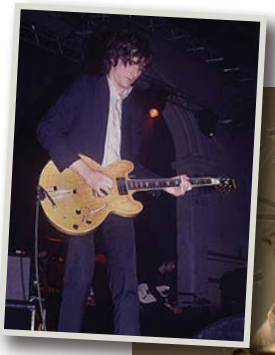
Epiphone was also pioneering Chinese production as early as 1998, and the shift from Korea to China was inevitable. Though at first the company used Chinese makers such as DeaWon, Muse and SaeJung, before long it had its own dedicated facility, Gibson Qingdao, which is now partnered by another factory, Epiphone Qingdao.

"In the first one we make a lot of our 335 products like Sheratons and Casinos, plus Les Pauls, SGs and some acoustics," says Rosenberg. "Epiphone Qingdao is more specialised in lower volume, peculiar shapes – Flying Vs, Explorers, basses like the Allen Woody Rumblekat, the Prophecy guitars. We'll also soon be bringing up a third factory in an old piano factory. It's huge."



Epiphone's range is now far more extensive than at any point in its past, and balances many different strands – including entry-level guitars, no fewer than 13 basses, original instruments such as the Prophecy rock guitars; the NanoMag-pickup-equipped Les Paul Ultra-III and the Wildkat semi; affordable remakes of Gibson classics such as Les Pauls, 335s and SGs, and guitars that carry forward the Epiphone traditions of the past, such as the Casino, Texan, Broadway and Emperor, and recently, an excellent USA-built '1962' Wilshire, echoed by an affordable Chinese '1966' Worn Wilshire.

Will we see more classics made again to the highest quality that Epiphone USA can manage? According to the company President, we can rely on it. "We've been looking at all the great Epiphones of the past," says Rosenberg. "I don't think there's anything that we can't do."



Left: Noel Gallagher 'Union Jack' Supernova; Top: Nick Valensi; Above: Slash with signature

Photo courtesy of Gibson

21st-century Epis (l-r): Worn 1966 Wilshire, Wildkat, Inspired By Lennon Casino, Les Paul Ultra-III and McCartney Texan

"We've got our own personality. Gibson is constrained by its history. We're not so serious" – Jim Rosenberg

INSIDE VIEW
JIM ROSENBERG

What were the first steps you took in 1992?

"The biggest thing was simple: having someone whose entire focus was Epiphone. Epiphone had been an afterthought, wandering along doing nothing. But the opportunities were huge. Gibson's US-built policy left the sub-$1,000 bracket wide open. If companies like Washburn, Yamaha and Squier could sell a lot of guitars, then why couldn't we?"

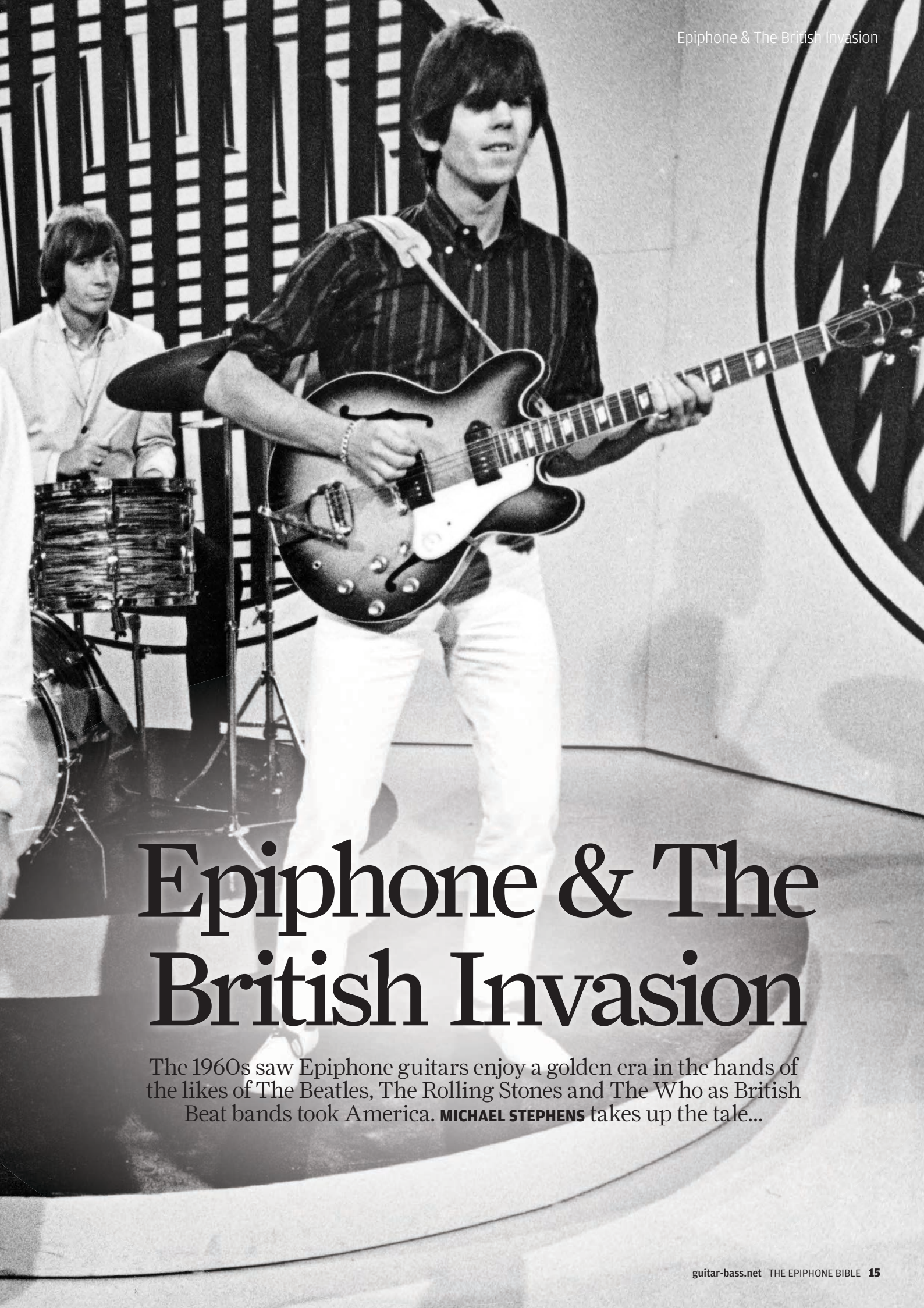
The biggest recent news has been the arrival of a true US-built Epiphone line. What difficulties did you face?

"Quite a few. At first, with guitars like the Lennon Casino, we had to rely on Gibson, but then we set up our own line in our distribution centre in Nashville. Getting the 'OK' from Yoko Ono to measure John's guitar was a big boost. We worked hard on details, like corian nuts and nylon saddles. In 2008, the Wilshire thing took off with the '62 reissue, and that was exciting. We've been making Les Pauls and SGs, but never anything uniquely ours. We've even redesigned the 60s Tremotone vibrato. The old one worked – or didn't work – by bending a pin! Now it works just as well as a Bigsby."

High-end Epiphones can cost more than low-end Gibsons. How do you keep your identity?

"We've got our own personality. We're a separate division with a lot of our own personnel including research and development, logistics, marketing, design and photography, and that spills out into how the guitars look and feel. We're not so serious. Gibson is more constrained by its history. Many people want them to do what they did in 1957. We do new things and people go, 'Oh, okay!' I don't pay much attention to Gibson. Not in a bad way... it's just not what I do."

Getty Images



Epiphone & The British Invasion

The 1960s saw Epiphone guitars enjoy a golden era in the hands of the likes of The Beatles, The Rolling Stones and The Who as British Beat bands took America. **MICHAEL STEPHENS** takes up the tale...

It's a thin line between love and hate. And, disregarding the guitar-styled pun (yes, we're sorry), that was long the case between Gibson and Epiphone. Before the acquisition of Epiphone by Gibson in 1957, the two companies were sometimes the fiercest of rivals in music's primary pre-war market for archtop guitars.

The two companies held each other in high regard, make no mistake. Both boasted enviable heritages, popular lines, groundbreaking innovations... but Epiphone's, shall we say, 'borrowing' of designs at cheaper prices sure did wind up Gibson. Epiphone is actually the senior company, founded in 1873 in contrast to Gibson's debut in 1902, and both were popular makers of mandolins and banjos – and lutes and fiddles – from the off. But Gibson's invention of the archtop guitar (particularly the electric ES-150 in the 1930s) saw a degree of open warfare between the two.

After Gibson launched its Master Models in '31, Epiphone hit back with Masterbilt branding. Epiphone introduced individual, adjustable pickup polepieces in 1937. Gibson did the same in 1940. Commerce is a cut-throat world. And through the ages, it's often resolved via a simple strategy: if you can't beat them, buy them (see also, Exxon and Mobil in the oil industry; Facebook and Instagram in social media).

So it was for Gibson in 1957, when a weakly performing Epiphone allowed the 'juniors' to pounce for a (reported) mere $20,000 buyout. Since then, the two have happily and successfully co-existed, with Gibson the parents in this self-styled Family Of Brands.

In 2016, the apple doesn't fall too far from the tree – most Epiphones now are styled after already existing Gibson models, but with different manufacturing (methods and locations) and prices. But, likewise, there have been some key differences and players faithful to each company.

Don't do Epiphone the disservice of calling all of its instruments 'entry-level' Gibsons, particularly not the 60s ones. Epiphone production had stalled in 1956 and 1957 due to distribution problems and strikes. Once Gibson had used up the stock of Epi parts to recommence the brand's production, it moved the operation wholesale to Kalamazoo, Michigan: same Gibson parts, mostly the same staff, even the same serial-numbering system. There wasn't a clear delineation between 'pro' and 'budget': in the early 60s, the Epiphone Emperor cost significantly more than the top-of-the-range Gibson Byrdland, while 1963's deluxe flat-top Excellente was $100 more than the J-200 and made of rarer tone woods. But to many intents and purposes, '61-to-'69 Gibsons and Epiphones were the same... but different.

The British have always liked an underdog, but in the 1960s, Epiphone – to many – became top dog

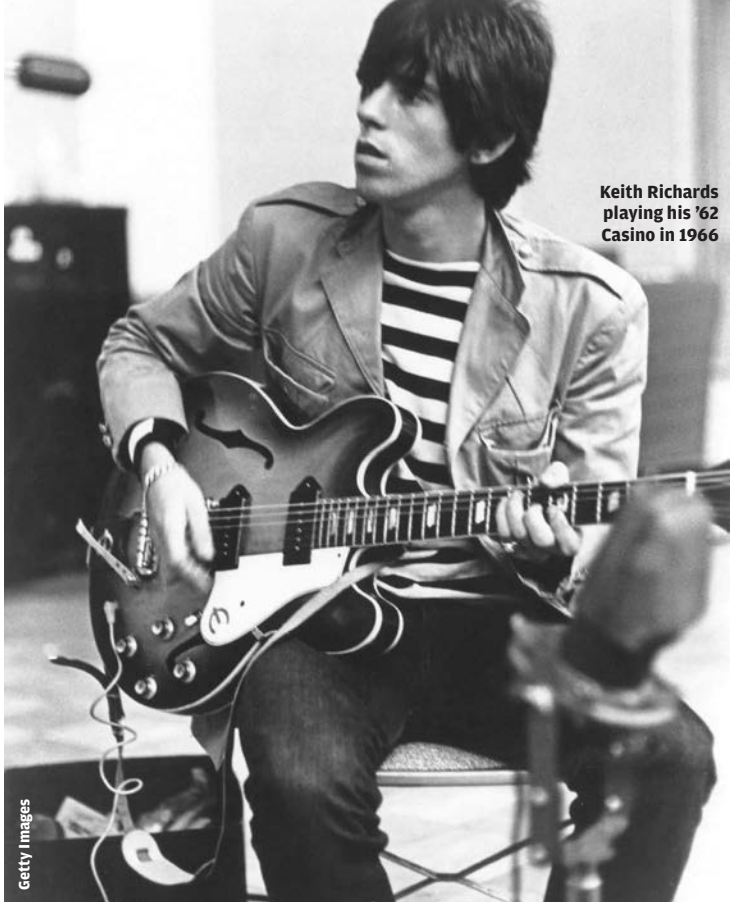
While the newly joined companies' main battle for guitar supremacy with Fender was played out in the biggest market, the United States, it was an emerging rock 'n' roll nation that arguably made Epiphone's own instruments famous – Britain. Why not? The British have always liked an underdog, after all.

But in the 1960s, Epiphone – to many – became top dog. Via the British Invasion bands and some fine models, Epiphone strutted out proudly from Gibson's shadow. Here's the story of the key players...

Before The Beatles?

The first famous British Beat rocker to be pictured with an Epiphone in the 60s? Guess who. It was probably Roger Daltrey. But not in The Who. Not even in The High Numbers. But in proto-Daltrey/Townshend/Entwistle outfit The Detours, when Daltrey was lead guitarist. In 1962, early shots of the band show Daltrey with what appears to be a Cherry Red Wilshire with black P-90 pickups, suggesting a '61 model. Daltrey later sold it to Townshend on "easy payments" and Townshend didn't even get to smash it. He later traded it for his first Rickenbacker, a 1998 model. He did smash that. Even so, an Epiphone Wilshire remains Pete Townshend's first pro guitar.

The Wilshire – like the related Coronet (single pickup) and Crestwood (double or triple pups, more bling) – is atypical of what we usually associate with Epiphones. A solidbody and shapes never produced under the Gibson badge, the Wilshire, Coronet and Crestwood were sort of a response to Gibson's Les Paul Specials and Juniors. Made by Gibson itself from 1959 to 1970, they're cult classics: basic rockers, but with some enduring garage appeal...



Keith Richards playing his '62 Casino in 1966

Getty Images

Buying a McCartney Texan

A Signature McCartney left-handed version of the Texan was manufactured at Gibson's Bozeman, Montana facility in 2006 (limited to 250, with soundhole label hand-signed by McCartney) – you'll pay a huge collectors' premium. As of 2016, you can buy an Epiphone Elitist "1964" Texan, based on McCartney's original (no Macca signature) and manufactured in Japan.

McCartney with his 2006 Signature, and an Epiphone Elitist "1964" Texan (below)

The Beatles, The Stones... and Epiphones

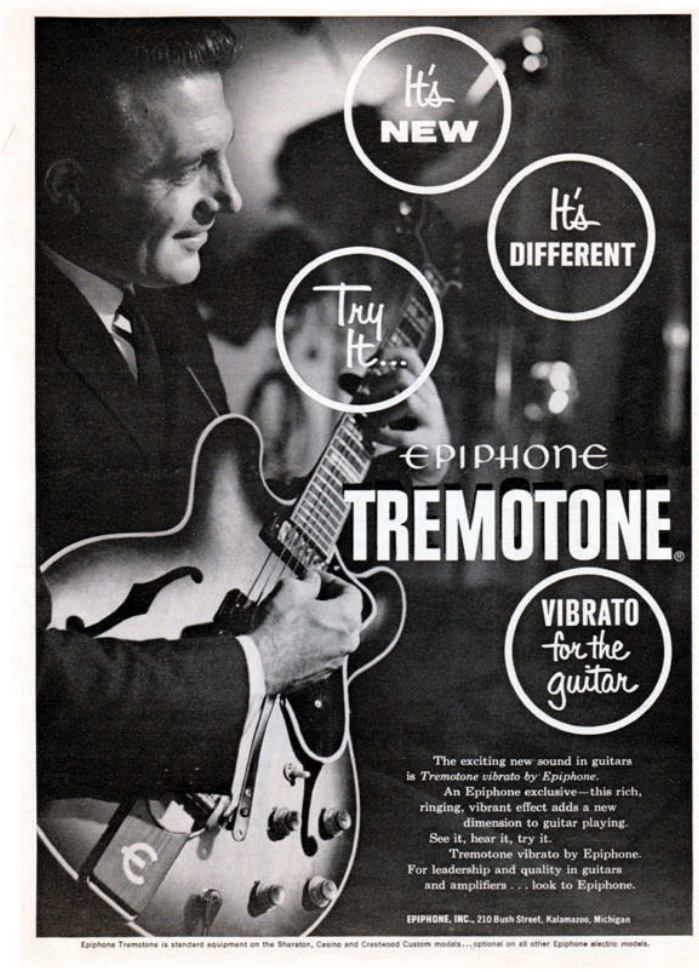
The first high-profile Brit user of an Epiphone semi was The Rolling Stones' Keith Richards. He reportedly got his sunburst '62 Casino ES-230TDV – black P-90s and Epiphone Tremotone vibrato – on the Stones' touchdown in the States in late May 1964. If it's true that he had to wait to visit the US to buy it, it's no surprise: just 211 Casinos were shipped in '62, and few would have made it to the UK.

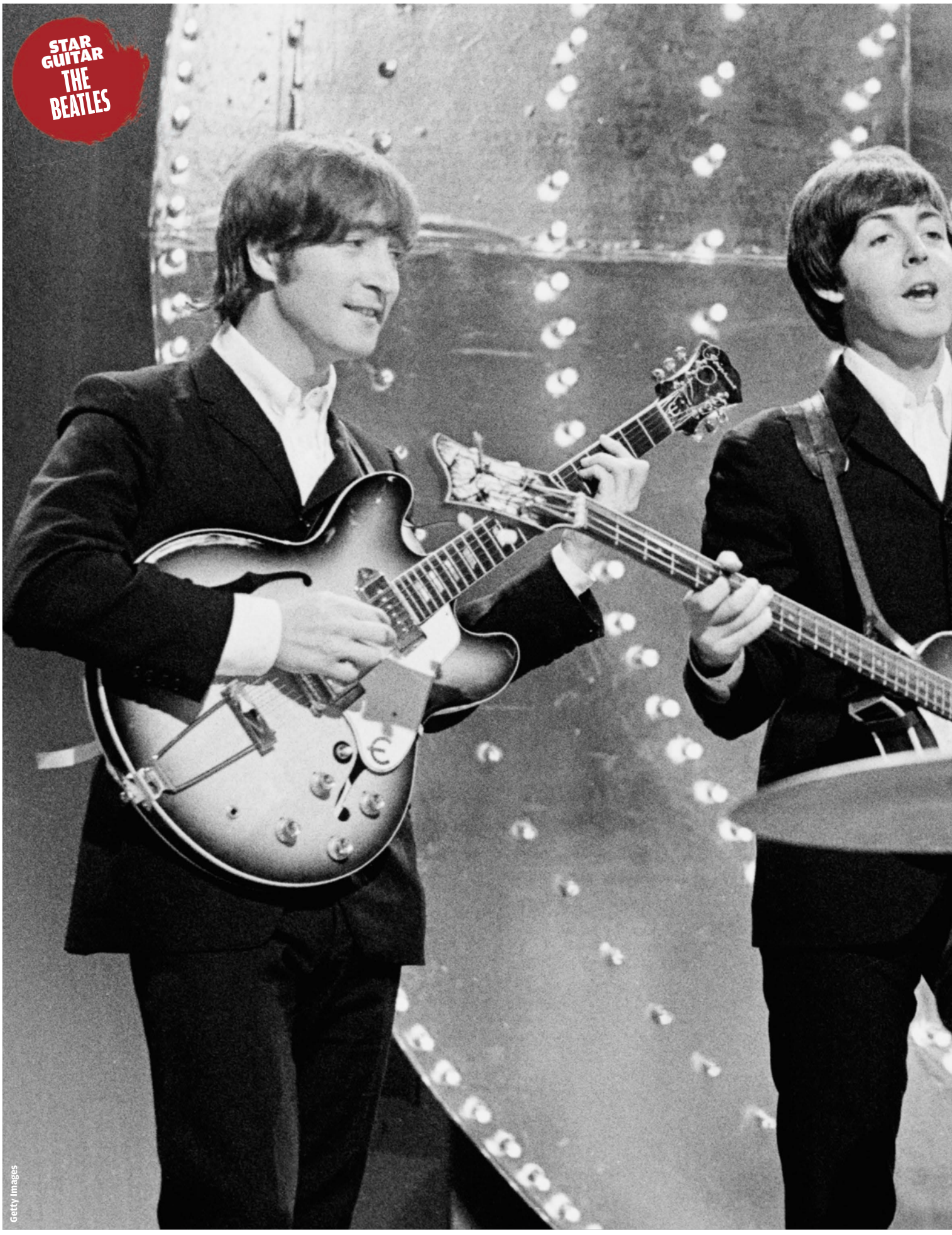
Neither Gibson nor Fender had a wide distribution network in the UK around that time; at the dawn of the 60s, there simply wasn't the demand from Britain. Pre-Beatles, groups were still grappling with the remnants of skiffle, and the biggest pop names were the likes of Tommy Steele and Adam Faith. As renowned music critic Nik Cohn noted, British pop was "pure farce... Nobody could sing and nobody could write. And, in any case, nobody gave a damn." The Beatles and the Stones changed all that very quickly.

There were select Gibson dealers in the UK – aimed at discerning instrumentalists – supplied by Chicago Musical Instruments, owners of the Gibson/Epiphone brands from 1944 to 1969. But there were also a growing number of UK music stores who wanted a quality US brand to sell to the blossoming number of wannabe beat groups, but who weren't proven enough to be awarded a coveted Gibson dealership. CMI's solution? These 'lesser' UK stores were offered Epiphones instead. So, the bigger dealers – music meccas such as Selmer on London's Charing Cross Road – stocked Gibsons and Epiphones. Others got their hands only on Epiphones. CMI had turned a delicate product-placing challenge into a win-win. Before then, it was mostly a case of going to the US to buy an electric.

Richards got much use out of his Casino, particularly as a live guitar. It features in quite a few (mimed) US TV show appearances and was one of only two guitars he had for the tour, alongside his Harmony 12-string acoustic. It's centre-studio in the first sessions Andrew Loog Oldham blagged for the Stones at Chicago's Chess Studios in June '64, and thus the guitar on their versions of Chuck Berry's *Around And Around*, Big Bill Broonzy's *Tell Me Baby*, Muddy Waters' *I Can't Be Satisfied*, Willie Dixon's *Down In The Bottom* and The Valentinos'/Bobby Womack's *It's All Over Now*.

In his 2010 autobiography, *Life*, Richards says that John Lennon criticised his guitar solo on *It's All Over Now* and Richards agreed that it was not one of his best; he doesn't elaborate on whether it was his or the guitar's fault. To be fair, the Stones had first heard the song only nine days earlier, >

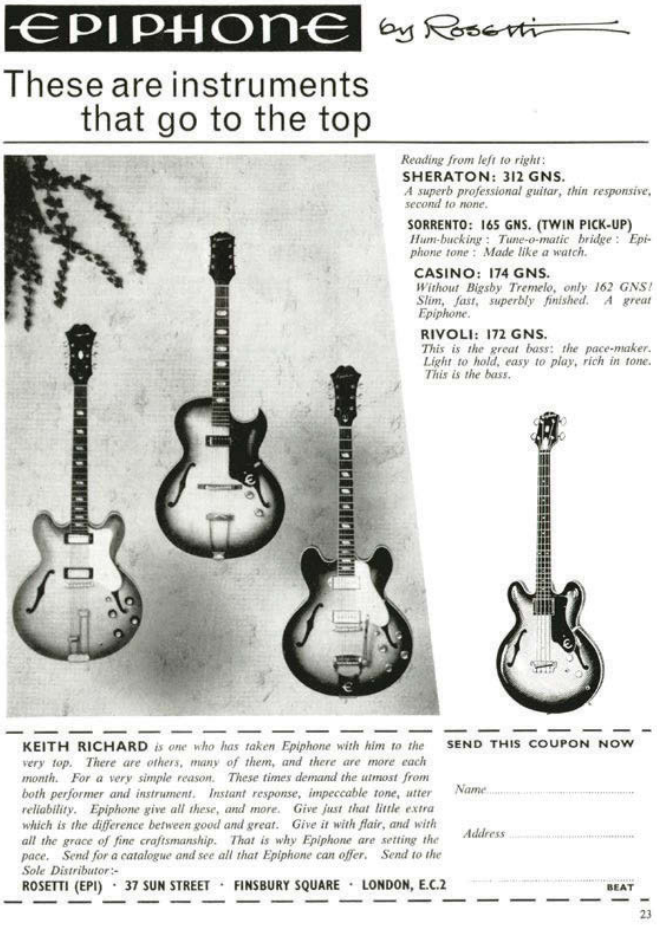



STAR GUITAR
THE BEATLES
Getty Images

Buying A Beatles Casino

How to emulate the Fab Four with a modern Epiphone

The Elitist 1965 Casino (with Gibson USA P-90s and trapeze tailpiece) is the closest currently made to a 'Beatle' or 'Stones' Casino. It comes in sunburst and (for a Lennon-esque look), natural finishes.
The 'base' Casino and Casino Coupe (smaller body size) also have that vibe.



and the Chess sessions ended, says Richards, "about seven o'clock in the morning. Everybody fell asleep".

Perhaps it was the tiredness that cultivated the enduring urban myth that Muddy Waters was there painting the Chess Studios ceiling when the Stones arrived. Keith was convinced, but according to Bill Wyman, Muddy was actually helping to unload the guitars from the Stones' van. Big difference!

The Chess sessions fuelled the *Five By Five* EP (UK) and much of the *12 x 5* album (US), and Keith's Casino featured large from mid '64 through '66 for the Stones.
"I used it for quite a while, mainly because I had it," Richards later told *Guitar World*. "It was a nice guitar, because Epiphone was a branch of Gibson at the time. It was a great guitar for studio work and clubs. But once we got into theatres and bigger gigs, I found the feedback and howl of those Epiphones was uncontrollable and I started to go for solidbodies, like the Les Paul."

The Casino seen being played by Brian Jones around this time was in fact Keith's: the two 'pooled' guitars. By the time of the release of *Beggars Banquet* (1968), Richards had a similar Gibson ES-330 in his arsenal. The Kinks' Dave Davies also caught the Casino bug (mainly for live work) and Howlin' Wolf had a Tobacco Burst '65 with Bigsby.

But, inevitably, the dramatic rise of Epiphone in 1960s Britain owed much to The Beatles. To pop historians who seek to precisely date such things, the British Invasion began on 7 February 1964, when the four moptops landed on the tarmac of John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York. Within two weeks, The Beatles had broken TV viewing records on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, hit #1 on Billboard's album chart with *Meet The Beatles*, and debuted live at New York's Carnegie Hall.

On *Ed Sullivan* on 9 February 1964, The Beatles already played prime US instruments – John Lennon had his Rickenbacker 325, and George Harrison his Gretsch Chet Atkins Country Gentleman – though when it came to 'teaching' Sullivan how to play, it was maybe apt that it was on Paul McCartney's German Hofner bass.

Visiting the US would certainly have opened The Beatles' peepers to a wealth of guitars they hadn't seen regularly in Europe, but the Fabs didn't get their Epis in the US.

Paul McCartney was actually the first Beatle to be an Epiphone owner. And it went back to his teenage years. In 2004, he told *Guitar World Acoustic* of his relationship with the brand: "The terrible thing about me is that I got locked in a mindset that I picked up from my dad. He really ground it into me to never be in debt, because, while we weren't on the poverty line, there wasn't much money to go around.

"The first time I wanted a guitar, I bought an Epiphone Zenith 17 for £15 on hire-purchase, so I had to pay such and such an amount every month. It sent a bit of a shudder through my dad – I could see the look of horror on his face, his sense of, 'Whoa, that's debt!'. He used to say, 'Never get under an obligation to anyone'..."

Paul McCartney was the first Beatle to be an Epiphone owner. And it went back to his teenage years

Beatles fans, stop right there! You will no doubt know that Macca's Zenith 17 was actually a German-made Ivor Mairants-commissioned Framus Zenith, but this was essentially a copy of the earlier Epiphone/Masterbilt Zenith archtop. Same model name, see, and the Framus was pretty much identical. It's a long story, and we haven't got the heart – or space – to argue with Sir Paul here.

McCartney continued: "It was great advice, but it did lead to my always tending to look for a great instrument, yes, but one that was reasonably priced, even when I could afford stuff. I think I saw the Epiphone the same way: they were never really top-of-the-line, but my dad had ingrained in me a certain way of thinking, and I don't think I've ever lost that."

Fast-forward to late 1964, and McCartney bought two Epiphones... and these ones were definitely Epiphones made in the Gibson Kalamazoo factory. >

Getty Images

Howlin' Wolf playing his 1965 Epiphone Casino at a recording session in Chicago in 1968

A scouser walks into a Texan Casino...

It was December 1964 when Paul McCartney acquired two key Beatles six-strings: a 1964 Epiphone Texan FT-79 acoustic and a 1962 Epiphone Casino ES-230TD, both right-handed.

It was a year on, August 1965 and back on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, when McCartney debuted live with his Epiphone Texan. But it wasn't just any old Beatles performance – if there were ever such a thing. The fifth song in was "Beatle Paul" alone, backed by a pre-recorded string trio, performing a song he'd written on the very guitar he was playing: *Yesterday*.

The song has not only since become one of the most-covered in popular music's history – 2,200-plus versions and counting – the 'solo' performance reportedly caused some friction within the Fabs. John, George and Ringo stood silent side-stage as Paul, in just a few minutes, effectively debunked the Lennon-McCartney songwriting supposition. It wasn't Yoko that split The Beatles, it was Epiphone (Yes, we're joking!). Paul's Texan was also heard on *Rubber Soul*'s *I'm Looking Through You* and *Michelle* and on *Here, There And Everywhere* (*Revolver*), *The Fool On The Hill* (*Magical Mystery Tour*) and *All Together Now* (*Yellow Submarine*).

Also in December 1964, McCartney had taken delivery of The Beatles' first Epiphone electric, his sunburst Casino. John Mayall was the swinging factor here.

In December 1964, Paul McCartney acquired two key Beatles six-strings: a '64 Texan and a '62 Casino

McCartney recalled: "You'd go back to his [Mayall's] place and he'd sit you down, give you a drink, and say, 'Just check this out'. He'd go over to his [tape] deck, and for hours blast you with BB King, Eric Clapton... he was sort of showing me where all of Eric's stuff was from."

Note that Clapton had yet to join Mayall – that was in spring 1965 – but he had, with The Yardbirds, played the Royal Albert Hall for the first time on 7 December, 1964 and Eric's playing was a red-hot topic with Brit blues sage Mayall. Although Clapton rarely played a semi with The Yardbirds, he had just acquired his red 1964 Gibson ES-335, later known as his 'Cream' guitar and among the most expensive electrics ever auctioned. Mayall said of the listening sessions with McCartney: "I showed him my hollowbody guitar that I'd bought when I was in the army in Japan in 1955. When people get together and listen to records, they talk about all kinds of things related to the music, so obviously, we must have touched upon the instruments and it struck home. He got a hollowbody after to get that tone."

Below **Paul McCartney with his Epiphone Texan FT-79 on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in August 1965**

Opposite page **John Lennon playing his Casino with trapeze tailpiece (top), before he stripped the guitar of its finish in 1968**

Getty Images

McCartney remembers it the same: "He [John Mayall] gave me a little evening's education. I was turned on after that, and [bought] an Epiphone."

McCartney's Epiphone Casino, serial number 84075, was actually shipped on 1 November, 1962. It's very likely McCartney acquired his Casino direct from Selmer in London (or, just as likely, Beatles roadie Mal Evans did). For one, it has a rare UK-made Selmer B7 Bigsby (unlike Keith Richards' US Epiphone Tremotone). Plus, Beatles manager Brian Epstein had already brought the band and shop close together by striking an endorsement deal, with Selmer selling Hofner basses with added Paul swing tags around the headstock ("Wishing you every success with this guitar", grinned a thumbs-aloft Macca on the tag). £5 commission for each sold? For Epstein, that was Fab business.

The Casino featured more famously on some of McCartney's lauded six-string excursions. It's on 1965's *Drive My Car* (slide solo), though McCartney's bass and piano playing easily eclipse it. The following year's *Taxman* is the most noted, of course. George Harrison was actually struggling to come up with a solo for his own song, so McCartney grabbed his '62 Casino, channelled a bit of Jeff Beck (with descending pull-offs a la The Yardbirds' *Shapes of Things*) and gives a nod to Harrison's then Indian-inspired frame of mind. Harrison was at first irked, but eventually relented. In '97, he admitted, "I was pleased to have Paul play that bit on *Taxman*. If you notice, he did like a little Indian bit on it for me."

The Casino's hollow roar pleased Beatles engineer Geoff Emerick, too. "Paul's solo was stunning in its ferocity," Emerick later wrote. "His guitar playing had a fire and energy that his younger bandmates rarely matched – and was accomplished in just a take or two."

The diamond riff of *Paperback Writer* is also McCartney and his Casino, on (predominantly) his own song. "We fell in love all over again with my Epiphone Casino..." McCartney told *Guitar Player*. "It always feeds back nicely." The song was something of a Macca masterwork, as he was also breaking in his new Rickenbacker 4001s for the throbbing bass, laying down a piano overdub (originally unused) and directing John and George's backing vocals.

Elsewhere, it's likely the Casino when Paul plays lead guitar fills on *Ticket To Ride* (and *Another Girl* and *The Night Before*, all recorded within days of each other). Speaking to *Melody Maker* in 1965, with *Ticket To Ride* playing in the background, John Lennon stated: "Hey, listen. Hear that play by Paul? He's been doing quite a bit of lead guitar work this week. Gear. I guess he's moving in!" Paul also crunches the Casino on *Helter Skelter*: Lennon plays bass.

Still Fab... beyond The Beatles

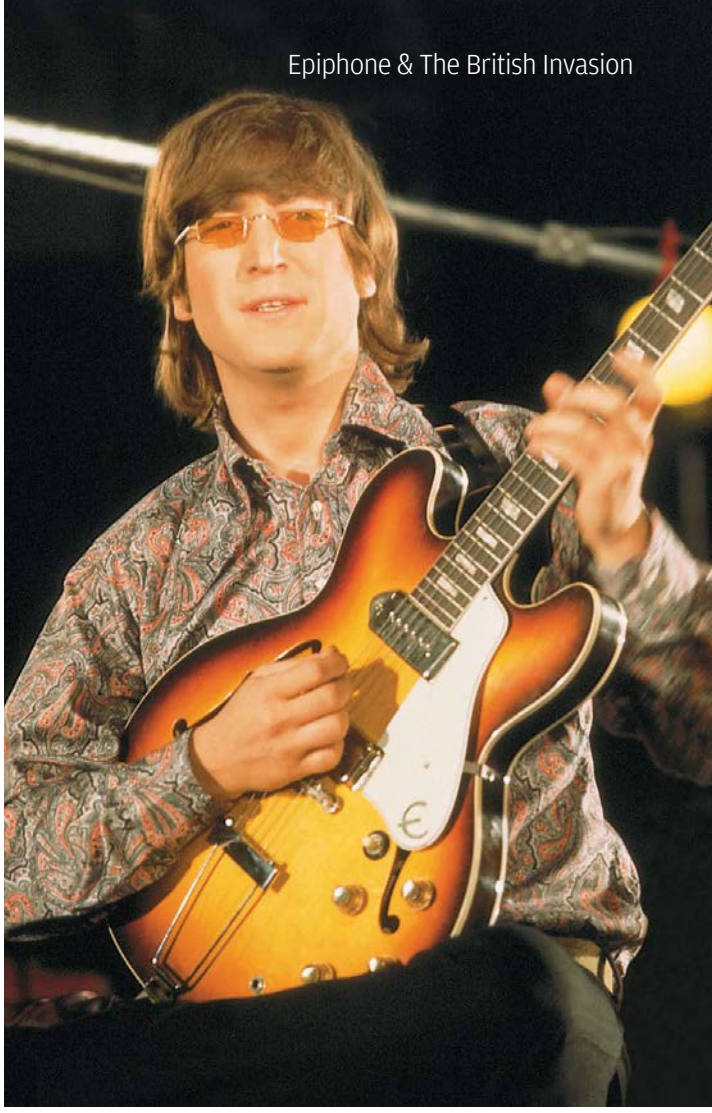
Post-Beatles, McCartney continued to cherish his Casino, the first Beatles Epiphone electric. He's played it live sporadically, though he generally prefers his 1960 Gibson Les Paul on stage. "The only reason I don't use it on stage is because it's a little too hot," he said in 1990, echoing Keith Richards' opinion. "It's great in the studio. You've got to stand in the right position for it not to feed back – we always had to do that in the studio, but nowadays guitars don't do this."

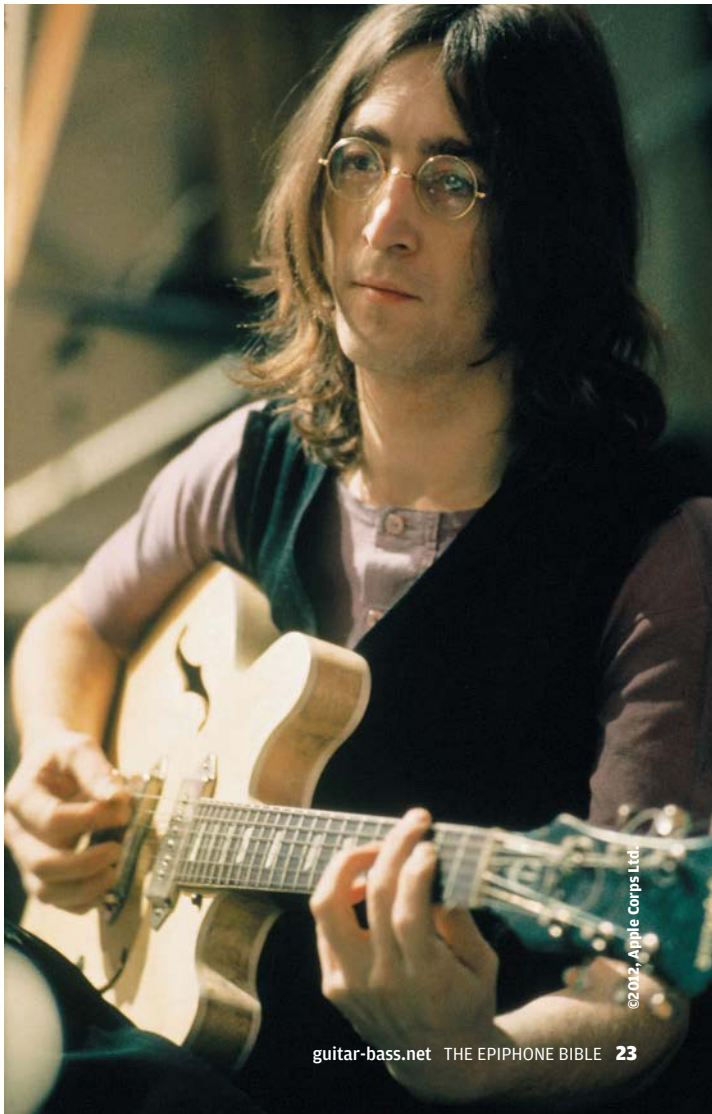
In the studio, McCartney broke it out big-time for solo album *Chaos And Creation In The Backyard* (2005), on which he played nearly all the guitar tracks. Producer Nigel Godrich (also Radiohead, Beck) described Paul's Casino on the sessions as sounding "fantastic" and you can probably take his word: on that album, Godrich banned McCartney from recording songs he didn't like! And, maybe through nostalgia, it has returned to McCartney's live shows: *Paperback Writer* in 2015 was still played by Paul on his Casino. McCartney, The Beatles' 'bassist' with the band's most influential Epiphone guitar, puts it simply: "If I had to choose one electric guitar, it would be this."

John and George's Casino doubles

Lennon and Harrison followed McCartney in getting Epiphone Casinos, but not until 1966 – an aeon in BeatleTime. But McCartney's Casino was something of a secret weapon – he was rarely photographed with it as a Beatle, and never played it live.

Harrison had acquired a Tobacco Sunburst Gibson ES-345 in '65, >





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Gibson vs Epiphone: What's In A Name?

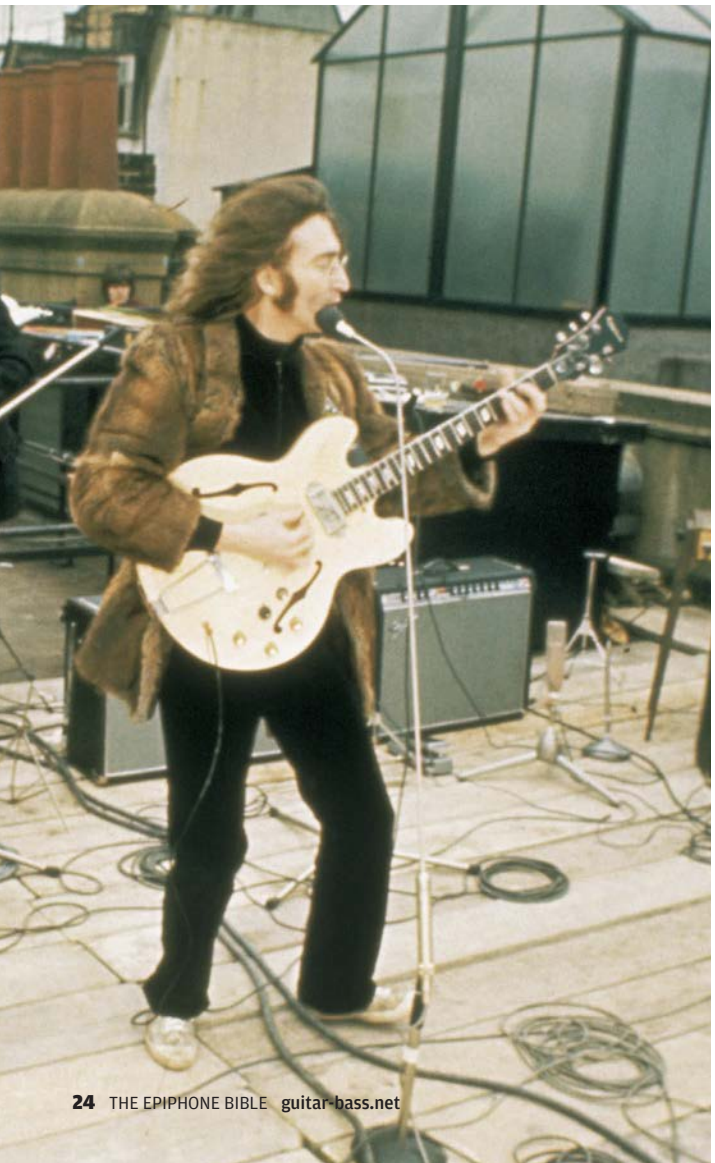
Orville Gibson. Leo Fender. Fred Gretsch. Adolph Rickenbacker. Christian Frederick Martin. When it comes to guitar history, it's fair to say not too much invention has gone into big brand names.

But when Epaminondas Stathopoulo took over from his Greek father Anastasios in 1915 in Manhattan (store) and Queens (factory), he realised quickly his immigrant family's name might not be best for the future he envisioned. Guitars by "the House Of Stathopoulo" certainly sounded grand enough, almost regal, but Epaminondas was a sharper marketeer. He took his nickname ("Epi") and the Greek for sound ("phone") and joined them. A memorable brand was born. Epiphone also had echoes of the Greek word epiphonous, meaning "one sound on another". Téleios ("Perfect")!

Epi didn't stop there. Gibson's archtops and acoustics always had a prosaic nomenclature based on the models' style and/or price – is it any wonder many guitarists can't even remember the nuanced differences between a Gibson L-5, L-7, L-10 and L-12? – but Epi brought the glamour. Epiphone models of the 30s struck with aspirational names such as De Luxe, Broadway, and Triumph. Even under Gibson, and after Epi himself had died, Epiphone continued with the marketing smarts. Heck, who needed persuading the Epiphone Emperor Regent was fretted finery personified? Workaday bolt-on electrics? Call them the Coronet, Crestwood and Wilshire – they'll sound like noblemen's country clubs, right? Want a whiff of European chic? Bring on the bling-sounding Casino, the Riviera, the Rivoli bass, the Granada, the Sorrento. In your head, you're already starring in a James Bond movie with Audrey Hepburn on your arm (maybe).

Quite simply, Epiphone guitars had better names than their big brothers (even if Gibson HQ's adverts for them were terrible). Consider Gibson's ES-125TDC*. A fine yet affordable archtop introduced in the 50s and a bona-fide Gibson, to boot. But, uh, that name? Even Gibson fans call it "the George Thorogood guitar". Want to know what's in a name? Ask Epaminondas Stathopoulos.

**Gibson ES-125TDC denotes Gibson Electric Spanish $125 (original retail price) Thinline Dual (pickups) Cutaway. But, of course.*



seen in photos of the *Daytripper* and *We Can Work It Out* video sessions and on tour in December '65, but after that, it seemed to disappear. A similar-looking Casino – like Paul's, with a Selmer B7 Bigsby – soon popped up. As with McCartney, it seemed George simply liked Epis: he certainly had played Paul's Casino, before McCartney had it restrung for his own left-handedness.

Lennon's Casino was finished similarly, but had a trapeze tailpiece instead of a Tremotone vibrato. With Beatles studio recordings relying evermore on multi-tracking, from 1966's *Revolver*, it's perhaps harder to pinpoint standout tracks where Harrison and Lennon wield their Casinos. George was prone to changing guitars more often than John, but for Lennon, his '65-made Casino became something of a visual totem. Although Lennon played a Gretsch Nashville on the studio recordings, his Casino is in the videos for *Paperback Writer* and *Rain*, filmed at Chiswick House in west London (Harrison plays his recording guitar, a red Gibson SG); Lennon debuted it live on 1 May 1966 at the *New Musical Express* Annual Poll-Winners' All-Star Concert. From thereon, it was his main guitar for Beatles live shows, including the legendary Shea Stadium performance. Harrison joined Lennon in using his own Casino as his main touring guitar through '66 – see The Beatles at Circus-Krone-Bau, Munich, June 1966, on YouTube for matching George and John Casinos in a pretty dire performance – and it's also extensively on *Revolver* and *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. George also plays it in the *Hello, Goodbye* promo film (though that song's lead guitar was most likely George on his 1961 Sonic Blue Fender Stratocaster).

For spring/summer '68, Lennon stripped his Casino of its sunburst finish; Lennon had earlier painted the back and neck of his white and grey. Harrison stripped his Casino later. This natural 'unfinish' was co-ordinated, though; it was on The Beatles' trip to Rishikesh, India, to study transcendental meditation with The Maharishi and friends in February 1968 that Donovan Leitch convinced John and George that bare-wood guitars sounded better. Donovan also taught Lennon clawhammer fingerstyle (see *Julia*) on the trip.

Harrison later told *Guitar Player*: "They [Casinos] became much better guitars. I think that works on a lot of guitars: if you take the paint and varnish off, and get the

Left **The Epiphone Jack Casady signature bass**
Opposite page **Lennon playing his stripped Casino during The Beatles' final gig on top of the Apple building**

bare wood, it seems to sort of breathe."

It was Lennon's that became the more iconic Casino, though, and he used it extensively on the *Abbey Road* and *Let It Be* sessions. For *Revolution*, Lennon plugged his Casino direct into the Abbey Road desk (Harrison did likewise with his Gibson Les Paul) for the twin fuzz-tone sound. George Martin explained in *Anthology*: "We got into distortion on that, which we had a lot of complaints from the technical people about. But that was the idea: it was John's song and the idea was to push it right to the limit. Well, we went to the limit and beyond."

Lennon played his Casino in the video and, of course, in The Beatles' live swansong atop the Apple Corps building in January '69. In between, Lennon appeared as a special guest for the filming of *The Rolling Stones Rock And Roll Circus*, which included a memorable performance by supergroup Dirty Mac – Eric Clapton on his red ES-335, Keith Richards on Fender Precision bass, Mitch Mitchell on drums, and Lennon playing his Epiphone Casino.

The Beatles' final foray with Casinos? Fittingly, it was the final track they recorded, *The End*, with all three trading solos: Paul and John on Casinos, George on his Gibson Les Paul. The order of soloing is Paul, George, John... just as they stood, left-to-right, on stage.

British Beat groups and basses

Just as Epiphone's six-strings boomed in the 60s, so did its basses. Gibson's own basses, such as the EB-2, were in vogue, but mirroring the relationship between the Casino and the Gibson 330, it was actually the Epiphone version that was more popular. Epiphone Rivolis – made in Kalamazoo from 1959 to '70, though with a hiatus in 1962 and 1963 – were a big British Invasion hit. Notable players included Chip Hawkes (The Tremeloes), Chas Chandler (The Animals), John Entwistle (from The High Numbers to early Who), Bob Lang (The Mindbenders), Tony Jackson (The Searchers), Karl Green (Herman's Hermits) and Paul Samwell-Smith, Chris Dreja and Jimmy Page (The Yardbirds).

An Epiphone Rivoli wasn't for everyone – it was reportedly too boomy even for John Entwistle –

Just as Epiphone's six-strings boomed in the 1960s, so did the company's basses

but for 60s basses, they remain, arguably, the coolest things, and there's a whole heap of people out there clamouring for an original. The closest you can get new these days is the Epiphone Jack Casady signature, though the Jefferson Airplane man's bass is long-scale and, of course, a different shape. Black Rebel Motorcycle Club's Robert Levon Been plays a vintage 60s Rivoli bought from a pawn shop. Why? "I couldn't afford to go to Guitar Center!"

In late 1969, Norlin purchased CMI (Gibson) and stopped making Epiphones in Kalamazoo, switching production to Japan. In 1969, The Rolling Stones played their fateful Altamont show. In 1970, The Beatles split up and Jimi Hendrix died. Unrelated events, but the passing of the decade certainly brought change. The Casino had been Epiphone's star of the 60s – from shipping 349 in '61 to 140 in '69, production had peaked in 1967 at 1,814 units.

In retrospect, Epiphone guitars' high-profile success in the 60s seems woefully undersold. Endorsement deals and adverts were never secured with The Beatles (although, to be fair, they'd stopped doing instrument ads by then), and throughout the 60s, Epiphone seemed focused on pushing the guitars' jazz heritage. The 1967 high-water mark of the Riviera saw it promoted with a cartoon psychedelic fish.

You still saw Epiphones in the 70s, sure. Andy Fraser played a Rivoli bass in latter-day Free and beyond. Steve Marriott used a Coronet 'Dwight' in Humble Pie, notably on '71's *I Don't Need No Doctor*. The Beach Boys' Carl Wilson played a couple of 12-string Rivieras in the 70s, but retro-fitted with Gibson necks. Go figure.

But it would take a quarter of a century and a very different decade for Epiphones to truly return to centre-stage. Even if they were in the hands of a somewhat Beatle-ish band...

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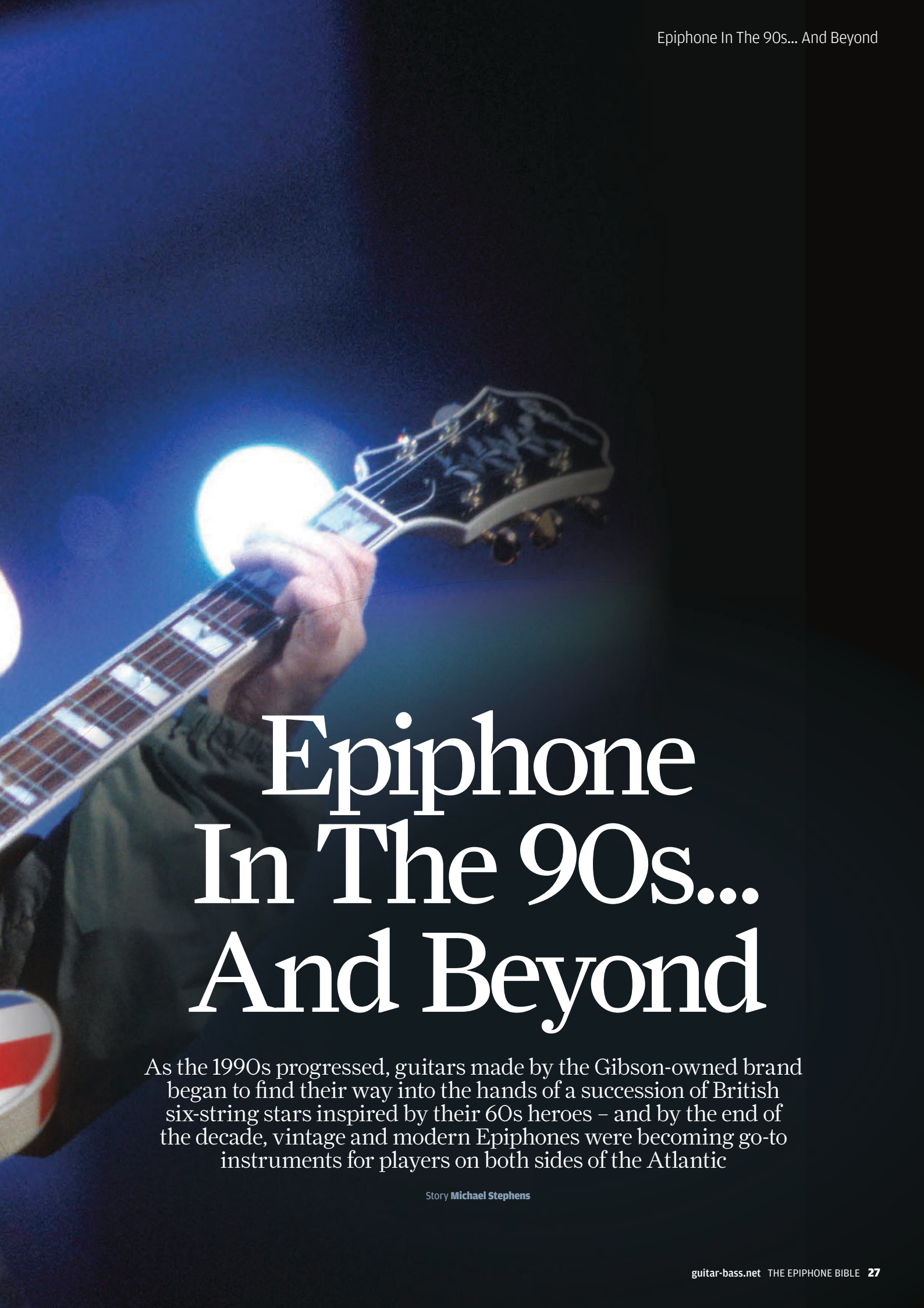


Epiphone In The 90s... And Beyond

As the 1990s progressed, guitars made by the Gibson-owned brand began to find their way into the hands of a succession of British six-string stars inspired by their 60s heroes – and by the end of the decade, vintage and modern Epiphones were becoming go-to instruments for players on both sides of the Atlantic

Story **Michael Stephens**

It's a cliché – and a cheap shot – to see prime UK rock of the 90s as something of a 'Home Invasion' – Brits selling the British past back to the Brits! Oasis cast as The Beatles, Blur as The Kinks, Paul Weller as a one-man Who/Traffic/Small Faces distillery, Supergrass as, oh, The Monkees? Maybe?

It's not a notion that stacks up for long, perhaps, but a certain 60s aesthetic clearly echoed into the 90s and it shot straight through to the guitars *du jour*. Epiphones were definitely, not just maybe, back.

Epiphone as a company in the 90s was a very different set-up to that of the 60s, yes, but the same was true for just about every guitar maker. Gibson's shifting of Epiphone to Far Eastern production did herald a demarcation between the marques, and not only because of pure geography. At first, Japanese Epiphones were made by the Matsumoku Company, and could be hit and miss. It was much the same for Fender and its Japanese offshoot, Squier, in the 1980s.

Early-70s models were merely Epiphone-rebadged copies already made by Matsumoku – bolt-on neck archtops, anyone? – but gradually got a lot better and more accurate. Japanese labour costs meant Epiphones were now way cheaper than USA Gibsons, but – as for other makers – Japanese labour costs caught up and since 1983, Epiphones have been made in Korea and, more recently, China. But what did this mean for 90s fans of Epiphones? It can be confusing.

Rock 'n' roll star guitars

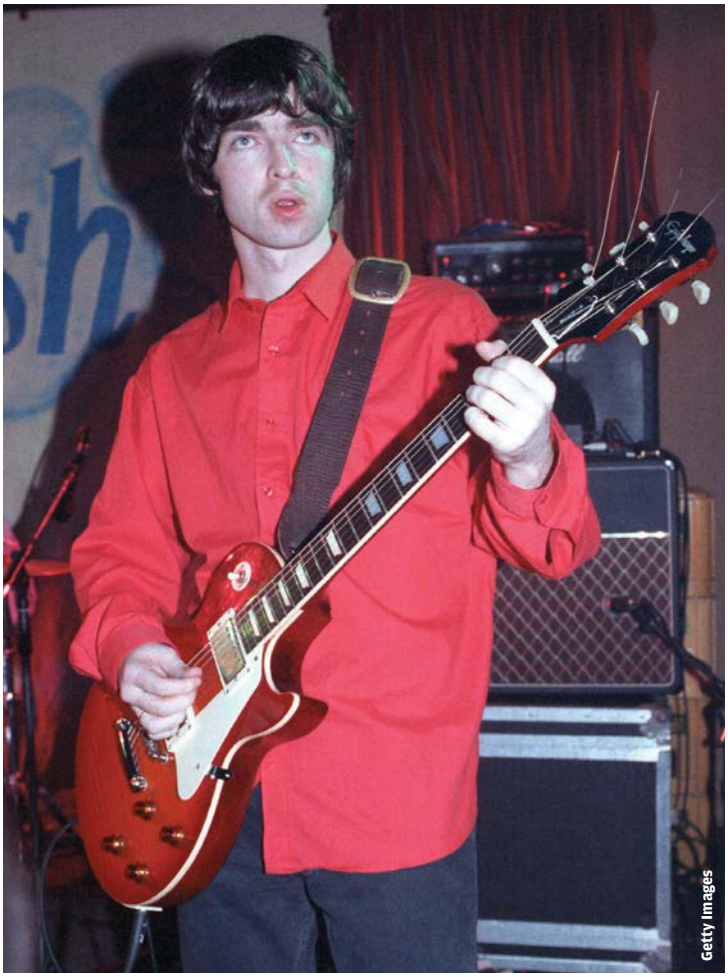
If there was one player to kickstart the 90s resurgence of Epiphones, it was Noel Gallagher. He'd arrived in Oasis with little more than a Korean-made Epiphone Les Paul Standard to his name, but soon – armed with a bunch of great songs, and guitar mentorship from Johnny Marr, who "lent" him vintage USA Gibson Les Pauls – Noel was soon a star. What to do?

A certain 60s aesthetic echoed into the 90s: Epiphones were definitely, not just maybe, back

Guitar technician Bill Puplett, who has worked on Noel's guitars since 1994, recalls: "following the band's early success, Noel soon acquired an impressive number of interesting guitars, especially the semis. Some of these were quite rare in the UK, such as the Epiphone Al Caiola models, which I really liked, as well as his Rivieras and Sheratons."

A whole bunch of Epiphones soon appeared in Gallagher's collection. EJ-200 and EJ-150 acoustics, plus those Riviera and Sheraton semis. But these weren't Korean 90s models, they were Japanese Epiphones made by Matsumoku (much more accurate Rivieras) or USA builds (limited-run Sheratons).

Gallagher and Paul 'Bonehead' Arthurs played Japanese Epiphone Rivieras a lot through 1994 and 1995, in the studio and live. Gallagher had, says, Bill Puplett, "quite a few". There's one of the Rivieras (with Bigsby) on the cover of *Definitely Maybe* – Noel himself is playing one of his Epiphone EJ-200s. A stoptail Riviera is in the video for *Don't Look Back In Anger* and Noel played it on Oasis appearances for *David Letterman* (US) and C4's *The White Room*.



Right **Noel Gallagher onstage at the Water Rats in London, playing the Epiphone Les Paul that featured heavily on *Definitely Maybe***

Below **The cover of Oasis' debut *Definitely Maybe* shows Noel strumming on an Epiphone EJ-200, with one of his Rivieras in the background**

Noel and Bonehead's Rivieras appear to be mostly '83s: block – but not split – fretboard inlays, stop tailpieces and full-size humbuckers. 1975 to 1981s had Frequensator tailpieces: Matsumoku-made Rivieras were discontinued in 1984.

But exact vintage didn't seem too important to Gallagher at the time. Says Puplett: "The thing with Noel and guitars is I think he was more focused on practicality, sound and playability than originality. His view was simply to have the best thing that worked for him, and didn't seem overly concerned about modifications to any guitar if it improved things."

Noel himself told *G&B* on the release of *Definitely Maybe*, "I've got a lot of Epiphones, either American or Japanese, 'cause I think the value for money is amazing, and if they're good enough for [Paul] Weller they're good enough for me. You can get an Epiphone 335 copy [sic] made from the same jigs as the US ones for £300 and the same guitar, if it's a Gibson, will be a grand upwards! I've got a few Epiphone Les Pauls, too, and to be honest, they're as good as the Gibsons."

Tuners were often changed – "Noel's very particular about best quality tuners and tuning," notes Puplett – and pickups too. That said, early Gallagher and Mark Coyle's "Brick Wall" recording ethos where "everything's on 10" means, says Puplett, "the actual specification of the pickups becomes far less critical, although some pickups were favoured especially for this kind of use.

"I think Noel knows exactly what he wants," he continues. "Old and expensive doesn't necessarily equate to good a guitar. That said, he does have some great vintage guitars that I've seen."

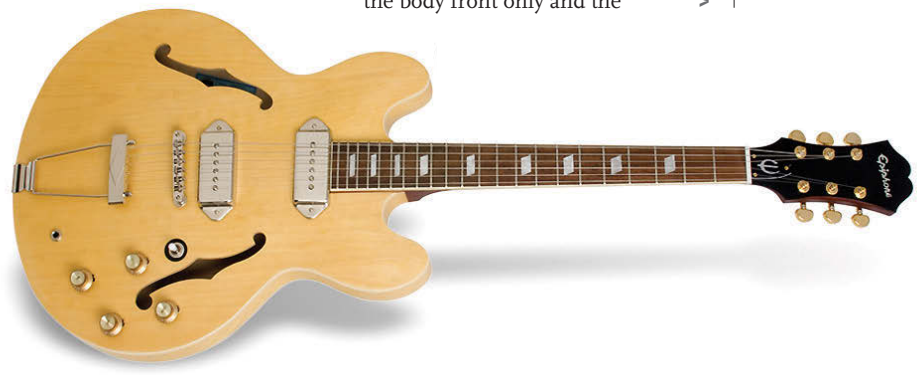
As ever, *caveat emptor*. But partly due to Noel Gallagher, Japanese MIJ/Matsumoku Rivieras with full 'buckers and stoptail are highly coveted. Bill Puplett remembers: "In the early days, things moved fast and quite a few guitars were bought on spec and came to the workshop to be assessed and to do whatever was necessary to get them roadworthy, often before even being tried out. Some of these soon fell out of favour and moved on, but on the whole, there were some great instruments which were really interesting to work on, and doing so many for the same player you kind of get to know what's required."

Maine-stay

Gallagher continued to upgrade. By 1996, he was playing Epiphone Sheratons with bigger, more ornate 'tree of life' inlay headstocks and Frequensator tailpieces. The most famous was probably his custom-finished Union Jack Sheraton with mini humbuckers at the heart of Oasis' Maine Road shows of April 1996. These seem to be Nashville USA Collection Sheratons (note, these were not Korean, but USA-built in '95), with the repaint ordered as a gift from then-wife Meg Matthews.

Epiphone still produce a Union Jack Sheraton. It's close-ish in spec, with Gibson USA pickups, though the flag artwork covers the body front only and the >

Above **Original Oasis rhythm guitarist Paul 'Bonehead' Arthurs with his Epiphone Riviera**
Below **Epiphone Inspired By John Lennon 'Revolution' Casino, as owned by Noel Gallagher**



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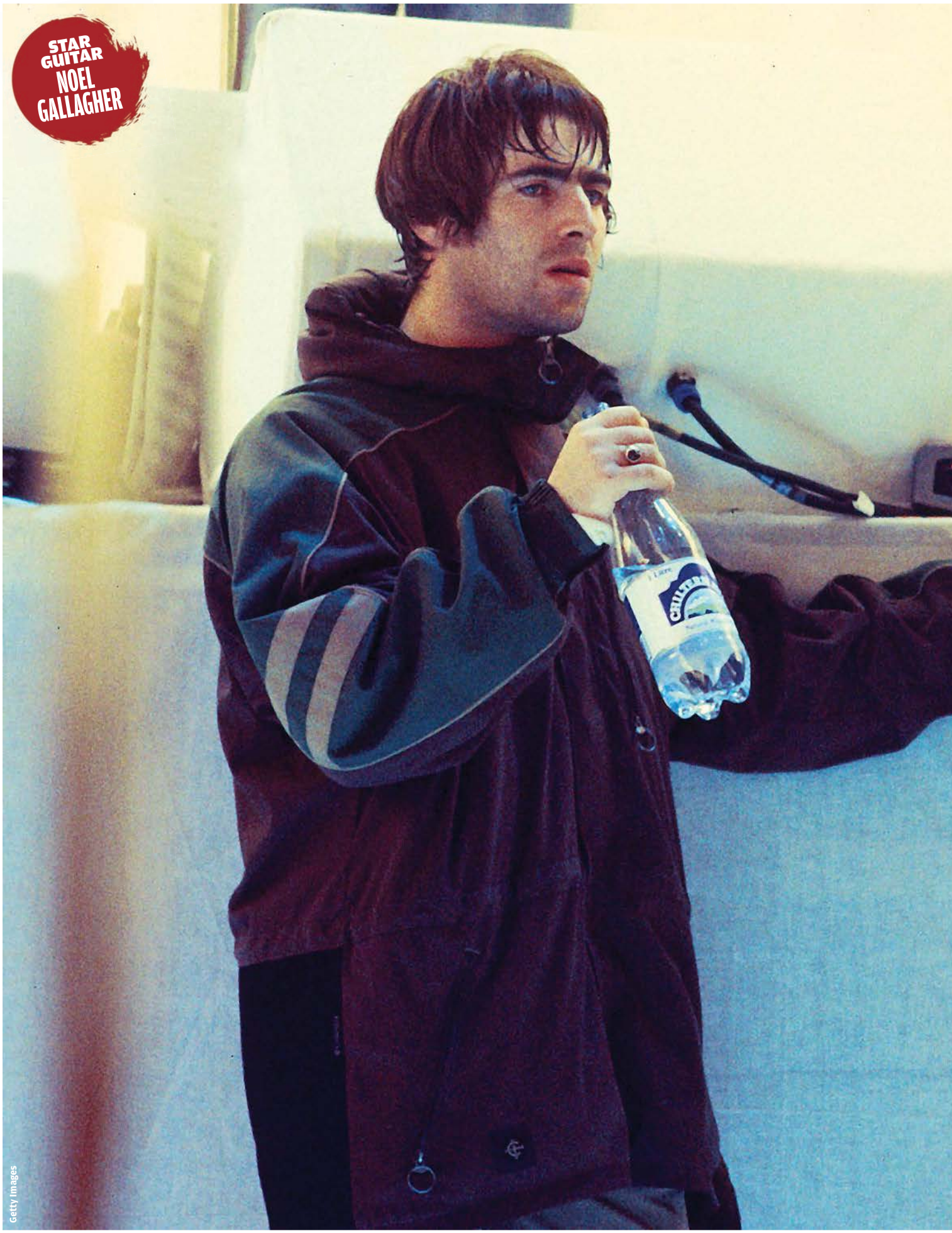
STAR GUITAR
NOEL GALLAGHER
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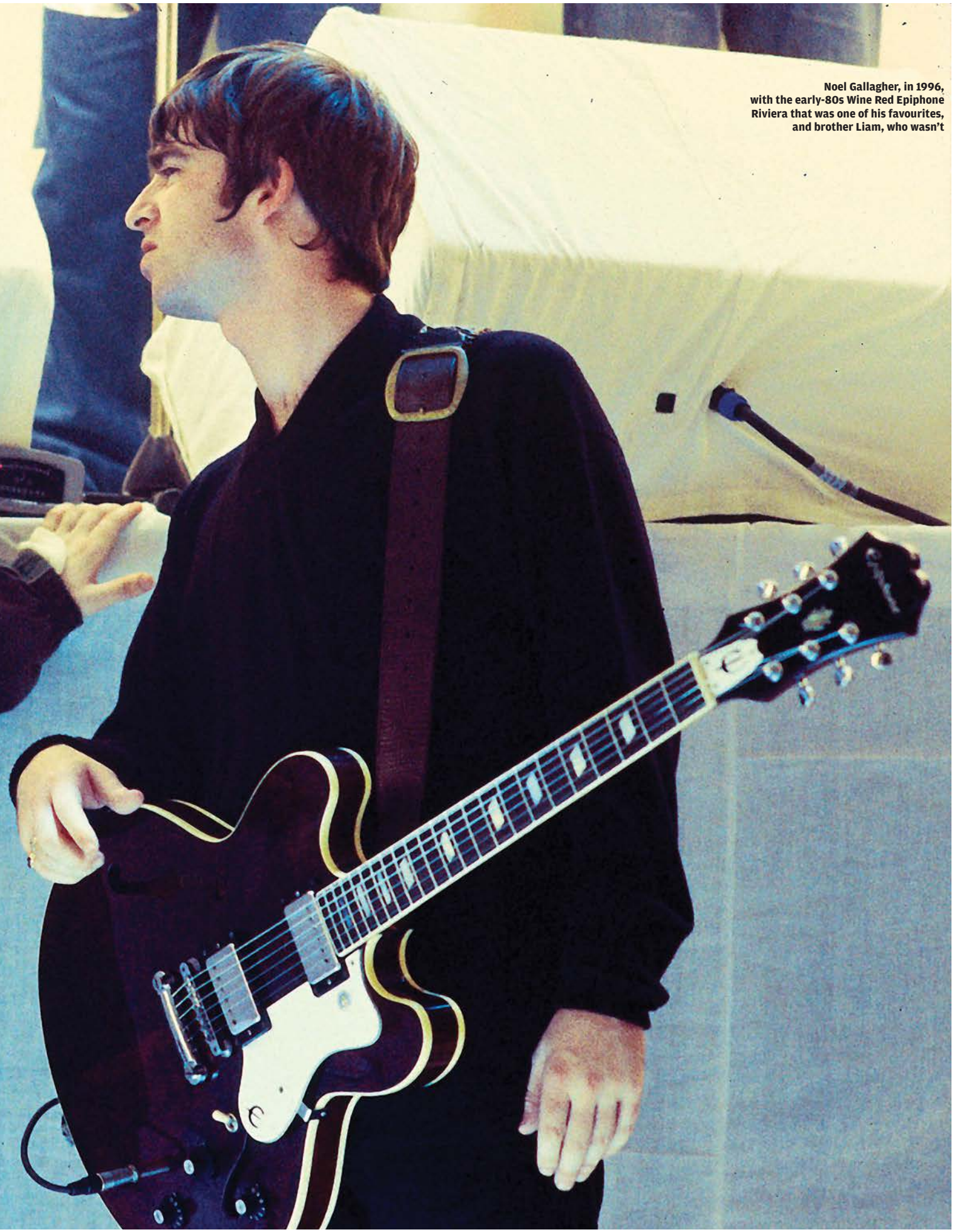
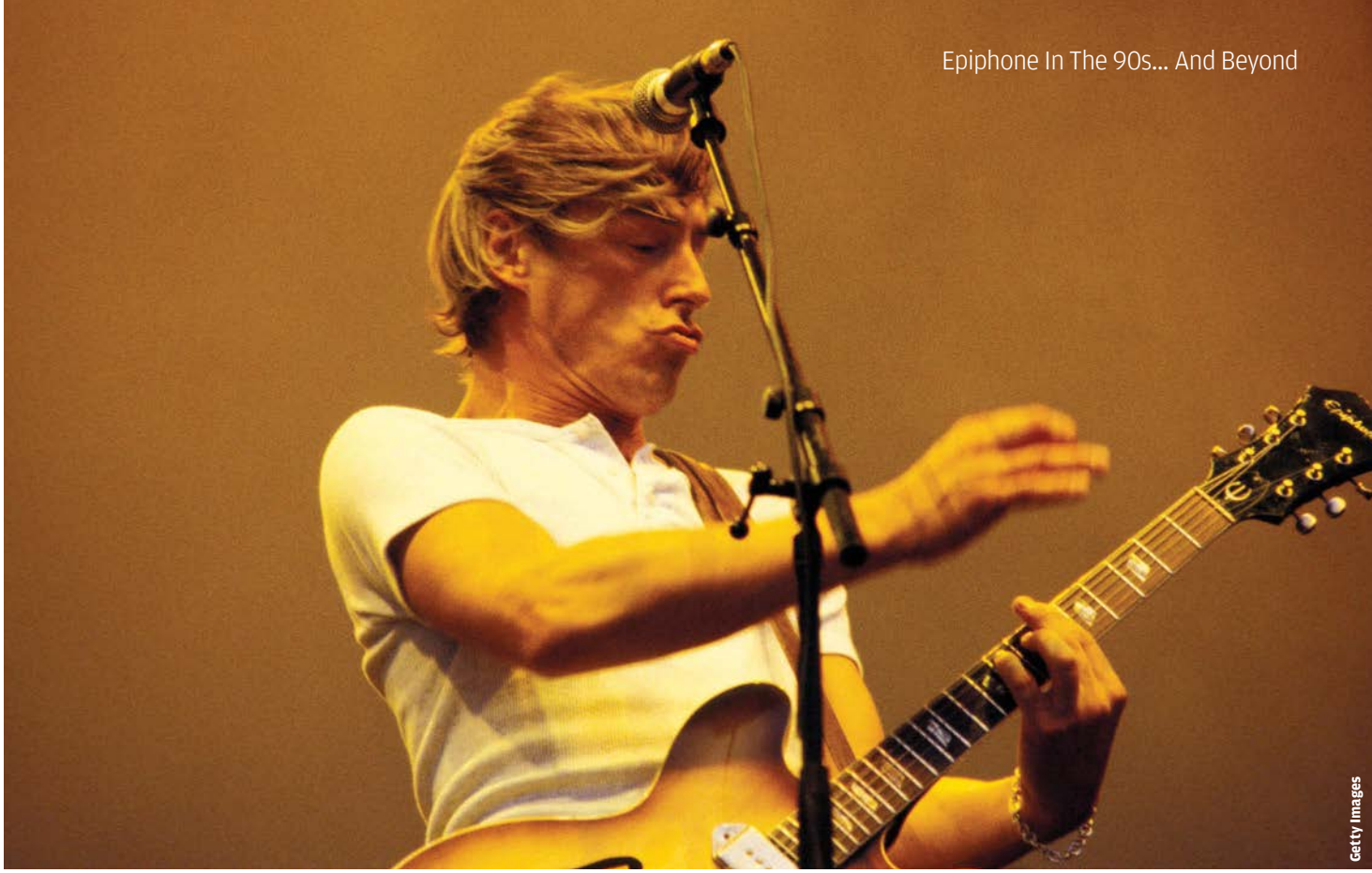


Noel Gallagher, in 1996, with the early-80s Wine Red Epiphone Riviera that was one of his favourites, and brother Liam, who wasn't



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blue is noticeably different. So: it's a 'tribute' model, not a Noel Gallagher signature.

The tobacco Sheraton Gallagher played at Knebworth and Earl's Court (1996) was another USA guitar built in the 1990s. Although expensive limited runs, Gallagher wasn't precious about these: the '62 Reissues had block inlays up to the 17th fret (historically accurate), but Noel added inlays up to the 21st fret.

For a bona-fide Noel Gallagher signature, there was 1997's Supernova. Although this was offered in a Union Jack finish (as well as Manchester City Blue, Cherry Red and very rare Black Ebony), it was closer in spec to Noel's Rivieras than his Union Sheratons as it featured full-sized humbuckers, a stop tailpiece and a Riviera/Casino-style 'coke bottle' headstock.

Rumour has it that Noel wanted an amalgam of his favourite Matsumoku/MIJ Epiphone Rivieras and a Johnny Marr-gifted Gibson Les Paul – hence the pickup selector being on the upper-cutaway bout. Although approved by Noel, there's actually not much evidence of him playing Supernovas – but they remain highly collectible. When Bonehead left Oasis (after 1997's *Be Here Now*), he was replaced by another Epiphone fan. Gem Archer already had Japanese Epiphone Casinos in natural and Cherry Red from his days with Britpop also-rans Whirlpool and Heavy Stereo. Live with Oasis, he also played a Frequensator-fitted Wine Red Riviera and Cherry Red Sheraton... these were possibly Noel's, anyway. Surprisingly, for all of Gallagher's love of The Beatles, he's rarely used fully-hollow Epiphone Casinos. He owns quite a few and, yes, he can be seen playing one in the video for *Sunday Morning Call* (as is Archer), but it wasn't until later, for final Oasis album *Dig Out Your Soul* (2008), that he recorded with them extensively.

Although approved by Noel, there's actually not much evidence of him playing Supernovas

Gallagher told *Guitar World*, "One is an original 1960s... I think it's probably a 1964 which has been sanded down, it's blonde. And one is one of the John Lennon ones, that came out a few years back (Ed's note: the discontinued Inspired By John Lennon 'Revolution' Casino). They were the two main guitars I used all the way through the album. Which is not like me, I don't really use real hollow-body guitars with P-90s, it's not really my style. But they seemed to work best in the studio this time."

These days, Gallagher rarely plays his Epiphones in public. He's upgraded once again, to vintage Gibsons, particularly J-200s and '59 ES-355s ("a particularly nice guitar," says Puplett). Why did Noel move on to vintage Gibsons? Probably because he could. He can afford what he wants. And in his wake, he's left a second-hand scramble for Oasis-correct Epiphones... >

Opposite page **John Lee Hooker with an Ebony Sheraton II. Epiphone released a limited-run 'Boogie Man' signature model in 1999, closely resembling this guitar**

Above **Paul Weller with his beloved 1966 Epiphone Casino, in Royal Tan finish**

Left **Alex Turner of Arctic Monkeys owns an Epiphone Wilshire Phant-o-Matic like this one**

Noel's Stand Bys

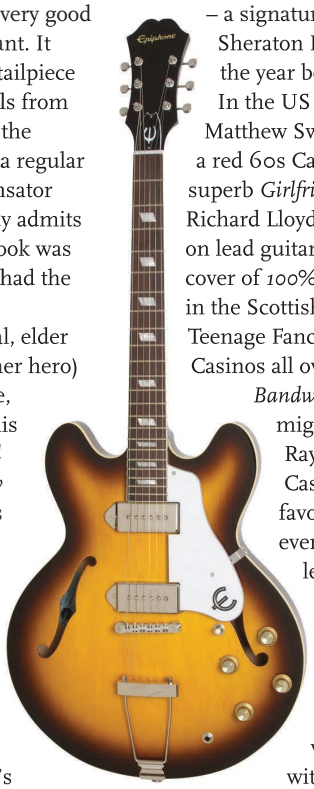
Gallagher's Epis don't only number the "big" models seen onstage. Here's his rare Epiphone Professional (1962 to '66, only 400 made), that came with matching amp. The on-body Tonexpressor, reverb and tremolo controls connect to the amp via a bespoke multi-pin cable. Gallagher also owns an Epiphone Al Caiola signature (1960 to 1969), another semi with Tonexpressor circuit. Caiola was a jazzer/sessioneer who played on Ben E King's *Stand By Me*. Did Gallagher play his Caiola on Oasis's *Stand By Me*? That's probably a masterplan too far...

Modern classics

The UK's other high-profile Epiphone user in the 90s was Paul Weller. His Casino became a staple from his mid-90s albums onwards, though his is a USA-built original. He says: "It's a '66. A very good year, and mine's brilliant. It doesn't have a Bigsby tailpiece like some of the models from around that time, just the regular tailpiece" – ie, a regular Trapeze, not a Frequensator Trapeze. Weller happily admits The Beatles' *Revolver* look was the hook. Weller even had the sunglasses to prove it.

As Oasis went global, elder stateman (and Gallagher hero) Weller was everywhere, too. His revisiting of his 60s youth on the *Wild Wood* ('93) and *Stanley Road* ('95) albums was suitably accompanied by the gritty Casino riffs of *Sunflower* and *The Changingman*. Did we even care that *The Changingman* simultaneously "borrowed" from ELO's *10538 Overture* and The Beatles' *Dear Prudence*? No, we did not.

Weller also has Japanese-made Elitist '1965' Casinos, and has also endorsed them in advertisements for Epiphone.



In the US, the renaissance of John Lee Hooker bought Sheratons back to the blues spotlight on *The Healer* (1989) and *Mr Lucky* (1991) – a signature Sheraton and Sheraton II debuted in 2000, the year before his passing.

In the US power-pop stakes, Matthew Sweet was rockin' on a red 60s Casino (listen to the superb *Girlfriend* of 1991, with Richard Lloyd and Robert Quine on lead guitars, and see the rear cover of *100% Fun*, 1995). And in the Scottish power-pop realm, Teenage Fanclub were splashing Casinos all over their albums *Bandwagonesque* and the mighty *Grand Prix*.

Raymond McGinley's Casino was a '62: "My favourite guitar, and on every album... and at least something in the band is older than me."

All through the 90s and onwards, Epiphone was working ever-closer with prominent, rockier names on signature models, bringing value Les Pauls, Explorers, Flying Vs et al to the masses, but Epiphone's own models were to the fore... which is

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Right **Pete Doherty plays a 1960s Coronet with P-90 in The Libertines**
Opposite page, top **Kings Of Leon's Matthew Followill playing an Epiphone Sheraton**
Bottom **Strokes guitarist Nick Valensi with his Signature Riviera P-94**

where they very much remain to this day. Radiohead's Ed O'Brien and Thom Yorke play Casinos, Kings Of Leon's Matthew Followill likes his Sheratons – he prefers it to his "genuine" Gibson Les Paul. "It's not as good. I can't get the feedback I like from that or any other guitar. The Sheraton doesn't give you that shrill feedback, it gives a nice humming feedback." The year of Followill's favourite Epiphone? 1983. Maybe Noel Gallagher was onto something about that year?

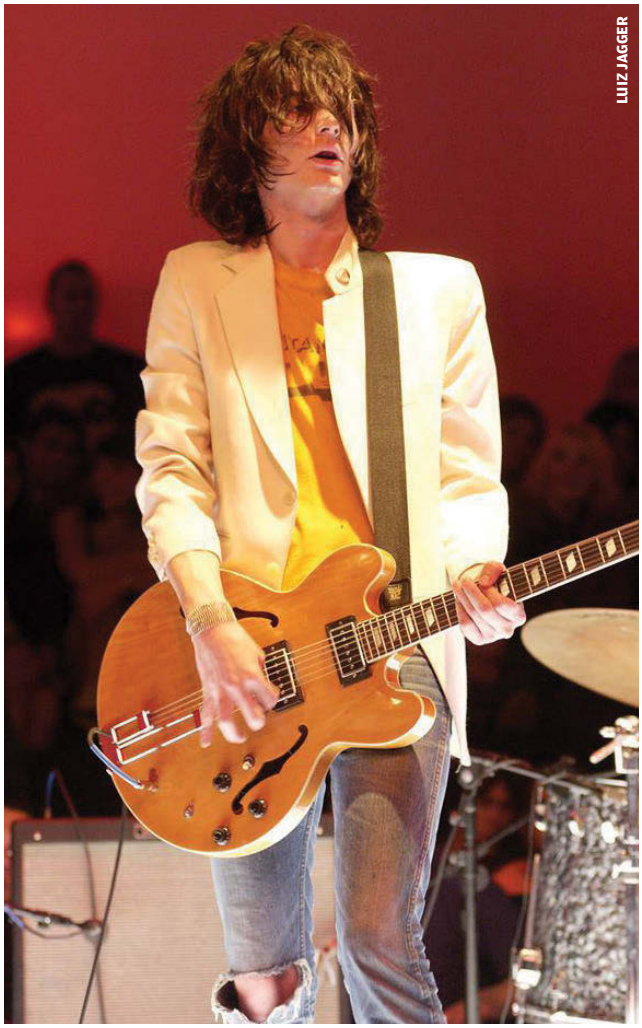
The Strokes' Nick Valensi has a signature Riviera, and Gary Clark Jr has his own Casino (see p52), while Alex Turner plays Texan acoustics and an EJ-45.

All of which proves one thing. The continuing story of Epiphone is much more than a sideswerve on the main highway of Gibson. Epiphone's Chinese production is as closely monitored as the USA side and its QingDao facility doesn't make any guitars other than Epiphones – the company has a come a long way from those early Eastern days.

Paul McCartney was the first Beatle to be an Epiphone owner. And it went back to his teenage years

Even the solidbodies are back in: Kurt Cobain famously played/smashed an ET-270 in early Nirvana (very much a pawnshop guitar at the time), but Pete Doherty's 1960s single P-90 Coronet is now considered a vintage rarity. Arctic Monkeys' Alex Turner has a Wilshire Phant-o-Matic (spec'd for My Chemical Romance's Frank Iero) in his huge gear haul. The Libertines/Babyshambles' Doherty also has a Casino and a similarly hollowbodied P-90 Gibson ES-330.

Epiphone's present President, Jim Rosenberg is suitably proud. He says: "I think the most misleading cliché I hear is that Epiphone is a 'cheap' Gibson. To me, that's like saying Toyota is a cheap Lexus. First, the word 'cheap' implies inferior quality. Epiphone guitars, like Toyota cars, are some of the best, most reliable products made. And I don't just say that. I know it."



Perfect Bay

British singer-songwriter James Bay has enjoyed a meteoric rise to fame, with his debut album entering the UK charts at Number One and going double platinum. He tells us why his 1966 Epiphone Century has been there every step of the way and how it nearly got away...

Story **Michael Stephens** Photography **Paul Alexander Knox**

Paul McCartney and his Hofner Violin bass. Eddie Van Halen and his masking-taped 'Frankenstrat'. Jack White and his Montgomery Ward Airline. Neil Young and his 'Old Black' Les Paul... James Bay and his red Epiphone Century?

Every era has its own inseparable duo of star and guitar, and while 25-year-old Bay is some way from the stellar company above, he's undoubtedly looking up. Two years ago, only a few knew who James Bay was. Quite a few guitar players had never even heard of an Epiphone Century. It's now a very different story.

Bay's talent is the key to such matters, of course. His debut album, *Chaos And The Calm*, is now so ubiquitous you'd be forgiven for thinking every track has been a single; in fact, it's 'only' six out of 12. Sales and praise have become constant companions: three Grammy nominations, Brit Awards, an Ivor Novello, mentoring from The Rolling Stones, the on-message charity single (*Running*)... and so it continues.

Today, Bay is playing Portugal's Festival Marés Vivas, in the same late-night slot played the day before by Elton John. It's a "fly-in" show, explains Bay, meaning he and his band don't have their own backline. Instead of his favourite Hamstead head and cab, he must settle for Fenders ("That's fine!" he chirps. "It'll be a good challenge"). But you can be sure Bay disembarked the plane with his must-have companion: his red 1966 Epiphone Century hollowbody electric. Bay understands these things are important.

> "I really believe in aesthetics, imagery, iconography, branding if you want to call it that"

"I really believe in aesthetics, imagery, iconography, branding if you want to call it that," he explains. "From the Stones' lips logo, to Michael Jackson's sparkly glove, to Bruce Springsteen's *Born In The USA* cover... So once I had the physical connection with my instrument, in playing and sound terms, I was always going to make it the forefront of what you see onstage."

"Between that and the hat," he smiles, "it's worked out. I can't lie – in the back of my mind, I thought these things might help me achieve what I want to achieve. It'd be naïve to say, 'ohh, it all just happened'. I knew I was going to have to do a shit-load of work to even get a bit to happen for me, and I have... but it seems to be working."

James Bay's school of rock

Bay is clearly adept at learning the art of a career in music, yet it's equally obvious he's no cynic. He simply loves music. Born in the small market town of Hitchin – population 33,000, "famous" for pioneering the use of black bin bags – he started playing guitar, aged 11, on an old nylon-string classical of his father's. "He couldn't play it, though. He'd got it off my uncle... he didn't play either." Inspired by hearing his dad's Derek And The Dominos *Layla* album – not exactly the zenith of cool at the turn of the century – young James discovered he had some talent.

"I still think a lot of even really experienced guitar players appreciate that an acoustic is a good thing to learn on. It was unwieldy, not easy to play... it sets you in good stead for whatever comes after that." >

Bay in live action with his beloved Epiphone Century, the guitar that shaped his debut album

What came next was a Yamaha Pacifica electric – but "I wasn't feeling anything remotely 'Strat' in me, so I sold it" – and then an Epiphone Les Paul Special II: "from the money for the Pacifica and pennies I'd saved from working down the market. I suddenly felt a little more like Slash or Aerosmith! Aged 14, that's what floated my boat.

"But I painted it. Dunno why! It wasn't very good..." his voice tails off, diplomatically. "Later, I had an Epiphone EJ-200..."

By his late teens, Bay was playing live and was a student at the Brighton Institute Of Modern Music (see also, Tom Odell, George Ezra, The Kooks). BIMM are justifiably proud of their student, but Bay is at pains to point out he's no production-line popstar: "I left early. I only did two years.

"I do appreciate the time I spent there and all the people who helped me, but... rules, lessons, I just don't think they should really exist when it comes to music, y'know? It depends what you want out of playing, what you want from the outset, I know that. But I feel that when I'm learning music 'by the book', as it were, I start to get worried. It stifles my creativity.

"My basic point is, when you don't know what you're doing, that's when people can come up with truly brilliant things. Sorry, tangent there! I just wanted to say it."

> "Rules, lessons, I don't think they should really exist when it comes to music. It stifles my creativity"

Gigging in and around London followed, supported by money from bar work: "Hated it. Mainly because I was working in the hours when I should be doing a gig. So, I finished music college when I was 20, turned 21, and I was looking at my life clock. I thought, 'hang on, I'm not some 19-year-old who's signed a huge record deal like I dreamed about. I'm 21!' It sounds harsh, because I know you can get into music at any point in life, but I became very aware that I was doing not much more than working in a bar."

First we take Manhattan

Fortune would have it that a friend had posted a video of one of Bay's pub performances on YouTube, and unlikely interest was piqued from New York label Republic Records. They asked to meet Bay.

"The last bar I was working in, I told the manager, 'I quit. I'm sorry this is last-minute, but I've got to go to New York and sign a record deal,'" Bay remembers laughing. "Well, that's what I hoped. It sounded so cheesy, but that's honestly what I said to them. Ridiculous, right? The guy who ran the bar was my parents' neighbour, and he was like, 'come on mate, are you joking?'"

Turns out he wasn't. Bay flew out to the States with his manager – yep, he'd learned he better have one – though he insists it was "really just to chat, play them some songs and hang, really. They wanted a better sense >

Bay's live rig: his '66 Epiphone Century and Hamstead amp

of me as a potential artist, I think, and as a person." There was downtime, and what does any aspiring musical artist do in Manhattan on a day off? Forget Central Park, the Empire State Building, the Statue Of Liberty et al...

"We went down to Bleecker Street!" laughs Bay. "I'd only been to New York once, with my parents. This was more on my own terms. I was sort of obsessed with Greenwich Village, this notion of the beautiful, idyllic, creative place, right? It was potent.

"We went down to Matt Umanov Guitars there, it's been there since 1965 I think. And Matt's still running that place, I think. Anyway, they had a load of Strats, Gretsches and so on... and behind the counter all these old Martins, Gibsons. But they also had this beautiful red Epiphone. An Epiphone Century..." Bingo.

Plugged into "one of those little cigarette box amplifier things", Bay played the Century and was instantly smitten. "What is it about guitarists and red guitars?" he questions himself. "Just so attractive. But this was particularly special beyond the colour. For a start, you could really see the grain of the wood. It wasn't just flat red. And it was hollow-bodied, which was great, as I was just one man and an acoustic guitar at the time. I was coming round to electric guitar again, but I wanted to do shows on my own, still. Well, I had no band. So, I was kinda thinking of hollowbody electrics, plus I like P-90s... and here was this Epiphone Century."

> "We went to Matt Umanov Guitars and they had this beautiful Epiphone Century..."

Regrettably, Bay couldn't afford it anyway. After a thanks-for-coming dinner with the people of Republic, Bay flew home. No deal, no new/old guitar. "I went back on the Matt Umanov website when I got back home, as I'd promised myself I would buy the Century when, or if, I was next in New York. And there it was: but with a 'Sold' notice on it."

But, hey, you already know this tale has a happy ending, don't you? It was a few days later when Bay got a call saying a package had arrived at his manager's office. He

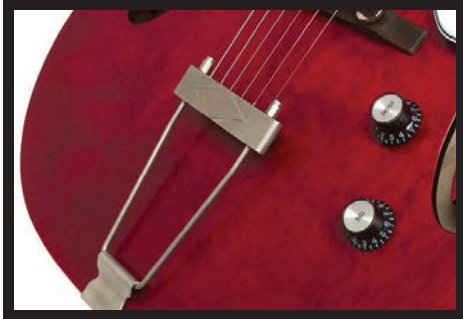
A NEW CENTURY DAWNS

Summer 2016 saw Epiphone reinstate the Century into its line-up. The Inspired By "1966" Century comes in Cherry and Vintage Sunburst. It has an Epiphone P-90 PRO with tin-plated brass baseplates, like those used on 50s- and 60s-era Gibson P-90s, plus Wilkinson Vintage three-in-a-row machineheads. It's not a James Bay signature, but – let's face it – it would unlikely to be back on the shelves without his impact.

"I think the whole thing is fantastic," he says. "I met the guys at Epiphone and, as much as they said thanks for playing that particular guitar, it's certainly not about me," he insists. "They did say that there wasn't a demand for this guitar until I started playing one, but the effect hasn't exactly been seismic. I'm not the Adele of guitar players! I just honestly appreciate it's happened at all. The 14-year-old me, even the me now, is losing his mind that maybe I helped bring this to light. And any people who previously wanted a guitar like this can now get one. That's outrageously cool to me.

"And it is a cool guitar. Y'know, it's not another version of a Casino, 'cause Epiphone have done Casinos forever, from Beatles era to Paul Weller to Noel Gallagher, whatever, and that's great. But the Epiphone Century is maybe just something a bit different.

"I may be writing with Dan Auerbach soon. He and I have become friends... we'll see how it goes. And I've been writing with Mickey Raphael, harmonica player with Willie Nelson. People keep calling me! The Country Music Hall Of Fame have just made a two-hour video retrospective on my career, and that involved some live things. I'm not making a lot of money, but I'm having a lot of fun."



Epiphone's Inspired By "1966" Century

immediately went down: "I had the time. I had a lot of time back then." The package was "a big box. Familiar shape, familiar dimensions. Opened it up, and there was the guitar, sent by Republic."

James Bay had got his record deal. And he'd got his Epiphone Century. "My life was maaaaade [laughs]. And the rest, as they say, is the rest..."

> "I thought 'this could be what I need for my playing, this could give me that 'fighting' approach'"

21st Century boy

Bay insists the Century's visual allure was only part of the package. "I was – and still am – into that whole Jack White and Dan Auerbach [Black Keys] thing," he says. "Scuzzy/fuzzy guitar tones, going back to T-Rex and Bowie as well. It was funny when I first picked it up, though: I was simultaneously broken-hearted and elated. I'd just picked up this gorgeous guitar with a wound G string when I thought I was going to be buying this cool soloing guitar, and it wasn't that at all, really... But I also thought, 'this could be what I need for my playing, this could give me that more 'fighting' approach'.

"I think that's what I'd always loved about Jack White's playing, y'know? He seems to be fighting with his instrument. Dan Auerbach has the same thing, playing those old Guilds and Harmony Rockets or whatever... I really like that idea."

Bay's red (or, officially, Royal Burgundy) Epiphone Century is from 1966. P-90 pickups replaced the New York model pickups in 1960, before the guitar was discontinued in the USA in 1969/70. But its era means his Century is a 'Kalamazoo' Epi, made in the main Gibson factory of the time. Bay is nerdily proud to stand out from the crowd.

"The guy at Matt Umanov said the red was quite rare," says Bay. "Epiphone didn't make many, and he said the single P-90 model was quite rare too.

"I have been to see Epiphone since, up at the company [now in Nashville], and they had all these amazing old booklets and lists >

BAY'S STRINGS AND THINGS

If you're trying to work out how to play James Bay's songs, you'll soon realise a crucial, if simple change – for pretty much every song, he's tuned down a whole tone.

"In the last few months, I've been revisiting standard EADGBE," he says, "but for the album, it was down a whole tone. I like a plain, open C and F chord, I just love those shapes. But I sing better in B flat than I do in C. It's as simple as that, it's not so much to do with the guitar. Though I've always played pretty big-bodied acoustics and I'm a big Ray Lamontagne fan, I love that deep, big sound. But, really, it's just for my voice. I'm a guitar player at heart, but I'm a songwriter, too, so I was trying to blend the two."

For strings, he loads 0.012s on electric guitar, down a tone, 0.013s on acoustic, also down a whole tone. "It's funny, though. When I was a teenager I was all about playing 0.010s with a little soft pick on a Strat copy, but when I started to develop my songs, I really changed my approach. Even for the more heartfelt songs, I still want to whack the strings a bit. I'm not Stevie Ray Vaughan, though – I know me! But I do like big bits of wire under my fingers, especially live, as I like to hit the guitar hard."

of stuff. I've since found out there were 366, I think, made in '66. 1969 was the last year that Gibson made Centurys... there were 11! So, if anyone's got one of those, they're very rare."

Bay's since bought another, his brown '65 Century with dual P-90s and what he believes to be a factory-fitted Bigsby. "The walnut one is a bit of a backup for the red '66, really. It's different. I took the Bigsby off recently just to have a closer look, and it's a heavier body, definitely. It can't just be the second pickup, an extra P-90's not that heavy. So it could be the actual wood that's different. I don't know.

"And even though the brown one is older, there's something about the red '66 that is lacking in lacquer that makes it breathe so nicely. There's literally something a lot more 'coated' sound-wise about the brown one. I obviously don't play it as much, and the red is so resonant. They look like ramshackle, thrown-together instruments in a way, but they're really not.

> "There will be more overt guitar work on my records in the future, if I can help it"

"The brown one was 900 quid in a sale, in England. I thought 'what's wrong with this? Why are these guitars not more?' I mean, there's no reason to make them more expensive, even as 'vintage' instruments, but they are fascinating to me. The brown one responds better to a plain G string than the red one. They both originally had a wooden bridge, but I've put a metal bridge with individual saddles on the brown one just to mess with it a bit – sort of make it more of an electric guitar.

"But I certainly don't have any problems with them. I've always adopted the Keith Richards approach. As soon as the men in white coats come in – I know that doesn't exist anymore – and any dial goes into the red, they'd turn it down. And Keith would say: 'turn it up! Crackly, fuzzy, buzzy... give me that'. I have had to change the pickup on my (red) Century, though: it gave up the ghost last year. But I kept the original and had one modelled exactly on it by a guy in New York.

I did go noiseless, though, because I want to play that guitar on TV. And TV studios suck for P-90s. It still sounds like a P-90. No-one's complained. It's just a bit better."

An Epiphone Century, like any guitar, isn't going to suit every situation. Bay himself admits he is very choosy about guitars because, in his head, he thinks "every guitar should be perfect. And that's just silly, really." But it is noticeable that, for a player who namechecks Eric Clapton, Stevie Ray Vaughan and Derek Trucks as inspiration, he steers clear of solos. Indeed, it was one "rule" Bay did adopt for *Chaos And The Calm*.

"True. Though in my live shows, there's two or three songs now where there are solos. But that's enough in a set where it's not really in the blues 'genre'. But there will be more overt guitar work on my records in the future, if I can help it. But, for now, I've made the concerted effort not to be a 'noodler'. It's a balance. It's a debut album. I wanted to get my songwriting chops across. Even the solos I do play in the set at the moment are somewhat written, they're not out-and-out improvisation. As someone who's focusing on songs and melody, I can't get away with that. Yeah, I'd love to be wailing away, improvising over a 12-bar for three hours – that's how I spent my teenage life in my bedroom! But I can't.

"It sounds a bit knobby, but I think the crowd deserve better than that. They've come for a chorus, a lyric, a melody, a feel... and a fancy bit of guitar if they can take it. I appreciate they're not coming for guitar solos. Who knows, though, where I'll be in 10 years? I just hope I'm still here, playing."

Despite his growing knowledge of production runs and Epiphone Century history, Bay remains intrigued by his '66's uniqueness. "One thing I love, that is so hard to find out about, is that my red one seems to have a particularly narrow headstock. Different to any other Epiphones, LG shape or dreadnought shape that I've had. And the base of the headstock on other Centurys I have seen is wider. Like a Gretsch-style – big, wide and square headstock. I really don't like that look, so I just love mine. That guitar, and me, basically wrote the whole album. The ballad-y songs and the rockier ones like *Hold Back The River*... all written on that guitar."

Not a bad return for one man and his guitar. Suffice to say, if he finds another Royal Burgundy '66 Epiphone Century, James Bay will now be able to afford it.

Barry Berenson

Jack For Good

One of Epiphone's most beloved signature artists, Jack Casady, celebrated his 70th birthday in 2014. He tells us about his early days in Washington D.C. and why he's never seen without his Epiphones

Back in the 1960s, Jack Casady, along with Paul McCartney and Motown studio bassist James Jamerson, revolutionised the electric bass with a style that was melodic, punchy and forward in the mix – both in the studio and on stage.

Throughout his career, Casady befriended the leading luthiers of the day to determine how to remake the electric bass into a truly expressive instrument, one that emphasised the musicality of the player. A member of the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame for his pioneering work with Jefferson Airplane, Casady and lifelong pal Jorma Kaukonen have toured and recorded as Hot Tuna since 1969.

Around 1997, Casady sparked a friendship with Epiphone president Jim Rosenberg and the Jack Casady Signature Bass was born. The instrument seemed to ignite Casady's passion for recording and performing all over again. Just as Jerry Lee Lewis once said he played piano like Chet Atkins, Casady too showed rock 'n' rollers that electric bass could be an expressive and exciting instrument. With the likes of Paul McCartney, Jack White, The Stone Roses and The Monkees all taking Jack's signature on tour, how could there be any doubters?

> "When I was 14 years old, we opened up for Link Wray. D.C. was a tremendous crossroads"

Q You grew up in the Washington D.C. area in the 50s, when it was developing a great music scene. Link Wray, Danny Gatton and John Fahey are from the area. Record collectors such as Dick Spottswood and Joe Bussard had radio shows. Were you aware of the local scene?

"Oh, totally. 1956 is when I started playing guitar. Being in the D.C. area was a crossroads of all kinds of music. I would get on a bus and go down to Constitution Hall and hear great orchestral works when I was 15 years old. Along that time, I'd take a different bus and go see Ray Charles, The Coasters, Jackie Wilson, and all kinds of rhythm and blues at the Howard Theater. Those acts that would go through D.C. on their way to the Apollo Theater, $1.50 shows – it was fantastic. At the same time, I'd go across town to the Shamrock and hear Mac Wiseman, Lester Flatt and Mike Seeger and The New Lost City Ramblers, and all kinds of folk and bluegrass and country that would come up to the area as well.

"So later on, when I started playing bass at age 16, I'd play at the fairgrounds in the summer for various country acts, and I'd be playing R&B in the clubs on a six-night week. Basically, five sets a night, 40 (minutes) on, 20 off, that kind of thing. But also, I remember Jorma and I when we had our little band when I was 14 years old, we opened up for Link Wray down on 10th street and the clubs there. So it was just a tremendous crossroads.

"One of the other things there was the wonderful jazz scene. I saw Roland Kirk and Eric Dolphy, players that just influenced me for the rest of my life, not only for the uniqueness in their playing but the tone that they would get from their instruments; >

Charles Mingus and Wes Montgomery. I saw Monk Montgomery playing an electric bass, which was heavily criticised in those days. But I got to see so many great artists. Nancy Wilson, I saw a number of times in these clubs. Great singers, great players. It was just a wonderful period. All of this was between 1956 and 1965, when I left to join Jorma in San Francisco and started the band that became Jefferson Airplane."

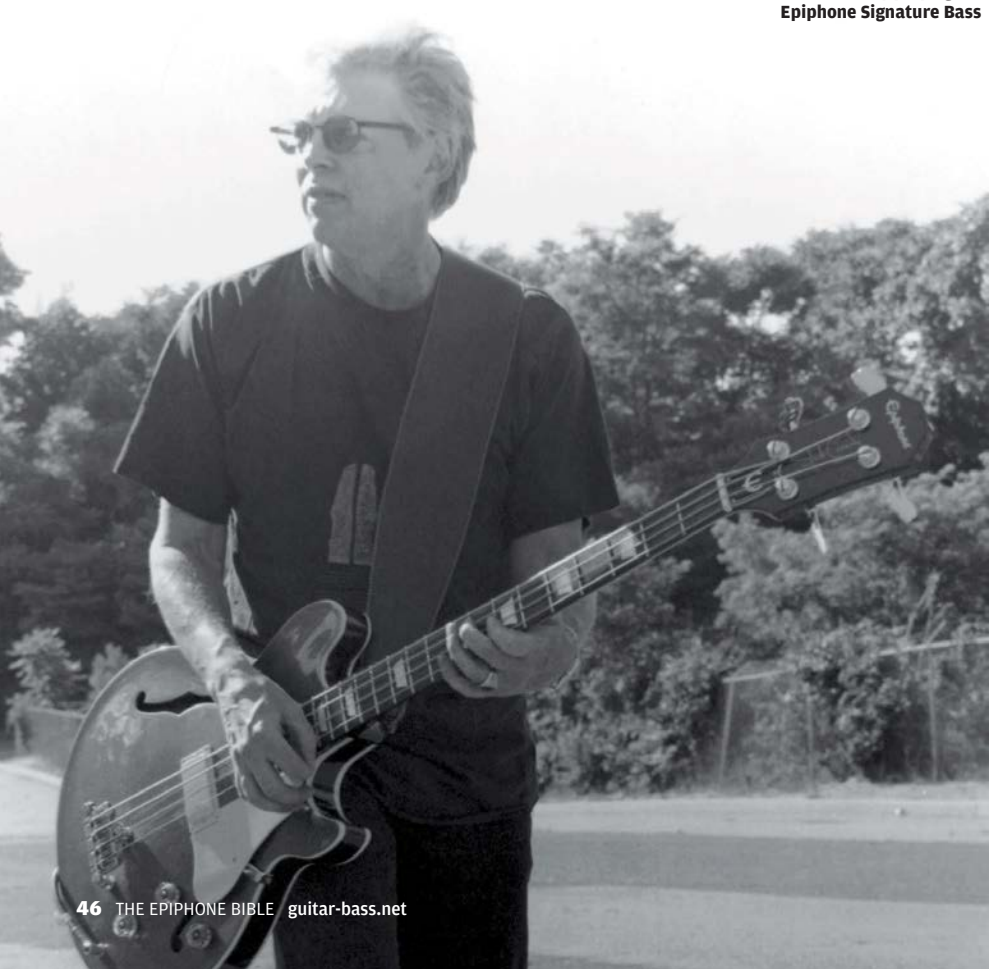
Q At that time, when you were becoming professional, were you aware that you had a unique approach to bass?

"I did have a musician friend of mine say: 'Jack, you were always moving the melody lines around back then, even on pieces where you were supposed to play like the record'. So I guess I was always doing it. I think the short answer is that when I started playing the bass guitar, I had access to all those upper registers as well as the low registers. And because I loved melody and I loved a lot of the orchestral works I heard, it was a natural flow to go from the bass orchestra end and listen to the double bass, listen to a composer move the melody line from the lowest to the low, up to the cello range and up to the viola range, the violin range and on up. And to me, I just heard the melodic lines coming out and tried to do that."

Q How are your Epiphone basses treating you?

"My Epi basses are treating me just fine! Jim Rosenberg [Epiphone president] is not only a good friend, but he and everyone at Epiphone really put forth the necessary mechanical means behind putting this bass out on the market. My lovely late wife Diana and I worked on these basses, getting the tone right on it, and it's still out there. In the world of bass manufacturing, it's somewhat of an odd duck to have an f-hole acoustic bass out there. But I'd like to think it's got a good solid position in the market and that it's a versatile instrument. So my Epi basses are treating me just fine."

Jack Casady playing his Epiphone Signature Bass



Q A lot of upright players choose your bass as their electric bass. Do you play upright?

"I'm a closet upright player. I have a 1937 Gibson upright bass, but I'm not a violin player. It's in the violin family, but I started out on guitar and that's really where I come from. You know, I'm always chasing that sound. I'm chasing the more acoustic sound, but with the articulation of an electric instrument. That was my philosophy in developing this. I discovered the original [inspiration], a Gibson Les Paul bass in 1985 in New York City at Chelsea Music, a little store that local musicians know about on 23rd Street next to the Chelsea hotel. I played it for a couple years and got a couple of others, but it slipped by me. I had played f-hole basses before. I believe the people who were involved with Alembic – Owsley Stanley and Ron Wickersham – started working with f-hole instruments with custom electronics in 1967. One of those is in the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame now.

"The issue that I had over a period of time was that it was a super-short scale. So when I saw this Gibson Les Paul bass – according to Walter Carter it was produced in the early 70s and they did a run of about 400 and then discontinued it – I really loved it, because it had the same philosophy that I had with low-impedance electronics, which opens up that sound. It's not a very hot sound and it's not a very loud sound, but it's got much more dynamic range. So when I approached Jim Rosenberg – this is 1998 – I wanted to reissue it with a different pickup. And the bass you see today is that project brought to fruition.

"With the long-scale neck and a single pickup in the sweet spot that has that full harmonic range, I thought it was a very versatile instrument that engineers would love and would not have to mess with. Jim

said: 'Jack, we'll give you anything you want. You want three pickups? I'll give you three pickups'. I said 'no, I just want one that's really great'.

"So we started developing the pickups. And I kind of developed them in a way that the early lap steels were: a nice thick heavy-gauge wire going around the alnico magnets. We basically fattened up that pickup and made it more clear.

"What we did in the 60s was flip it [the pickup] over and glue on another alnico magnet. It would boost the output of the pickups that way and have a bigger magnetic footprint. Because you're only using one pickup you could do that. And it fattened up that pickup and made it more clear. We used somewhat the same strategy for the Epiphone.

"I worked with JT Riboloff to develop that pickup and we went through maybe 20 or 30 different prototypes before we were able to 'okay' what was finally put out on the market. And one of my concerns was that it was one thing to do a custom version, but I wanted to make sure the production version held up. So every year, I get two new basses of whatever the production line is and take them out on the road and play them so I know the quality is right up to snuff."

Q In the studio, do you like to mic the bass amp or go direct?

"I like tube preamps – any number of tube preamps. I use the V72 Telefunken a lot, but there are a number of great ones out on the market now, both boutique and more established names.

"My job, and what I want my legacy to be, is to make something with universal appeal. I wanted to get the instrument to where a jazz player, or a pop player, or a folk player, or a rock player could find that instrument and work inside the instrument with their own technique. It's my feeling that having that single pickup in the sweet spot allows you to then move your hands dynamically over the 'speaking' length of the strings. And through various techniques, a player can pull out the different sounds. But at the same time, it's a true, real sound. It has a transformer with an impedance selector.

"One of the things I started to shy away from in all the early developments of bass electronics in the 60s is back then, we were trying to make the instruments more hi-fidelity. We were able to extend the dynamic range, but then I found out that the preamp limits you somewhat. You might find an instrument that has an unusual sound, but then you're stuck with that sound all night long.

"So, I wanted to have an instrument where the individual player could, with the density, the meat in their hands or how they approached the instrument, get something different. It's the player, it's not the instrument. But at the same time, you want an instrument that will respond to different directions that you discover, and hopefully this instrument does that.

"None of this would have happened without Epiphone. 17 years later, I really didn't expect that this would still be in the line. It's a testament to how unique Epiphone is in the industry; and Jim seems to like to work in the vintage area of instruments that have come and gone because of fashion. Epiphone brings them back so that the new, young players will come along and hear these instruments and understand what a good instrument is supposed to sound like. That's why I love Epiphone."

> "None of this would have happened without Epiphone. It's a testament to how unique it is"

Don Mitchell

Grand Horizons

Bring Me The Horizon have grown from their metalcore roots, developing a melodic sound that has won them fans all over the globe. Guitarist Lee Malia tells us why his signature Epiphone LP Custom is a vital part of the band

Lee Malia has become one of the best-known guitarists in UK metal over the past decade. His band, Bring Me The Horizon, are a hard-rocking quintet who have continued to shift stylistically with each of their five studio albums, mixing metal and electronica and winning a string of industry awards.

Malia's incredible technique and melodic metal style can be heard on stages around the world, with his Ltd. Ed. Epiphone Signature Les Paul Custom at the heart of his live setup. Inspired by a 1970s vintage classic Les Paul Artisan, the Lee Malia Signature Les Paul Custom features a unique pickup combination of a Gibson P-94 in the rhythm position and a Gibson 84T-LM humbucker with coil splitting in the bridge position.

The guitar has a stunning walnut finish with gold hardware and ornate pearloid fret markers and headstock patterns. The body, top and glued-in neck are mahogany with a rosewood fingerboard. *Guitar & Bass* put the guitar through its paces after its release last year, and our reviewer was suitably impressed, noting: "It looks like a distinguished old Les Paul and it sounds like one, which is quite a result in itself at this price; but the fact that it's been made for a modern metal guitarist forces us to judge it in those terms, too, and it passes the test with ease."

We caught up with Lee to hear his thoughts on his super-cool signature model...

> "I wanted to create something really classy. Something that I think appeals to anyone who plays any genre of music"

Q How's your Epiphone Les Paul Custom?

"It's great. I used it to record the album and it's holding up well on tour. It's all I use now. I have a bunch of my Epiphones I've been using. I just wanted to create something that looks really classy. Something that I think appeals to anyone who plays any genre of music. Anyone could pick up this guitar and not necessarily know that I play in a metal band."

Q With two keyboards on stage, is it ever difficult to make things blend without clashing? Keyboards can sometimes be just as heavy as guitars...

"Yeah. On certain songs, it's still there – the big riff. But on a lot of songs, we've worked it out to make the guitar work with the synth, it doesn't have to be a big riff at the forefront going on all the time. We worked out what's best for the songs rather than saying 'oh it's got to be a guitar part'. Whatever suited the songs to make it sound huge."

Q How are you using the Les Paul on stage as you negotiate the different textures and sounds of the new album? Have you found a method to cutting through?

"Yeah, definitely. Like, all my clean sounds are on the middle selector, so it's a bit of the humbucker and a bit of the P-90. It sort of fattens it all up and gives it a lot more of a twangin' sound. That's why I wanted the P-90, because I love a single-coil sound but I didn't want a weaker output. So I thought a P-90 is pretty good.

"That's the main reason. And when you turn up the humbucker in that position, it's great for all the gainy stuff. And it cleans up really well if you bring down the volume a bit on the guitar. You can get a lot drier tones, it's just... good (laughs)!"

Lee Malia's stunning Ltd. Ed. Epiphone Signature Les Paul Custom

Joe with his Epiphone Ltd. Ed. 2015 Joe Bonamassa Les Paul

Don Mitchell

Joe Business

Joe Bonamassa's long association with Epiphone has resulted in three signature Les Pauls, most recently the Epiphone Ltd. Ed. 2015 Joe Bonamassa Les Paul Standard with Bigsby. We spoke to Joe about his latest model...

Q What influenced the direction of the 2015 signature model?

"Jim Rosenberg (Epiphone president) and I talked about doing something different for our third signature guitar. I'm a fan of the five-speed transmission. I love a Bigsby. So we talked about doing a different colour this time, more of a British Racing Green or an Inverness Green. And the way it came out sort of reminds me of a Jaguar Green. We've had great success with these guitars and I thought it would be good to have something with a Bigsby, not just the standard 'Joe B Les Paul' model in a different colour. I wanted something that played great and could add to the value, without too much of an added expense and, you know... make it cooler!"

> "I've been using it on the road. It's really, really good and it sounds great"

Q Do you ever use it on tour?

"Yeah I've been using it on the road. It's really, really good and it sounds great. All the Epiphones I've received have been really, really consistent. What I see of the Epiphones, based on the ones in my own collection and what I see at the meet and greets after the shows, is that the weight is pretty much right-on. Obviously, you can't control the trees (laughs). The neck shape is happening, too. They sound great. It's been a great partnership."

Q You've spoken before about your admiration for some of the great Les Paul players. Some of them moved on to other guitars, some stuck with it. Is the Les Paul still your main voice?

"Well, I've been playing on tour a lot of 335s, 345s and stuff like that. I play a bunch of different guitars, whatever mood suits me. But I've made the Les Paul my home for a long time. It's shaped the sound of my records."

Q Any interesting features you've found that have surprised you?

"They're all 1,000 per cent different. Which is no surprise as they were a hand-built guitar. And they're not all great. You can get a 335 that will take the head off a Burst. They're not all the 'Holy Grail'. They all vary in neck shape and size. There's no definitive parameter on any of them. They really are hand-built guitars. No two are the same."

The Epiphone Joe Bonamassa Les Paul Goldtop

Gary Miller

Blues Junior

Gary Clark Jr's soulful blues tones have earned him a Grammy Award and fans including Eric Clapton, The Rolling Stones and Barack Obama, with an Epiphone Casino always at his side. All hail the new star of Texas blues...

Gary Clark Jr's major label debut for Warner Brothers, *Blak And Blu*, earned him a Grammy Award, and his cool rhythm-centered style and total disregard for pop music clichés has made him a favourite of artists from every genre – including Alicia Keys, Eric Clapton and The Rolling Stones. Clark fearlessly plays whatever inspires him (his signature cover of *Catfish Blues* has its roots in both country and blues).

From the start, Clark's constant companion on stage has been an Epiphone Casino, and he was duly rewarded with a signature model – the limited edition Gary Clark Jr. "Blak & Blu" Casino, Clark's first signature guitar, in two guises – one with a trapeze tailpiece and the other with a Bigsby.

Gary first confessed to *Guitar & Bass* about his obsession with the Casino back in 2013, saying: "It's a bit mad at this point, I've probably got about 20 or 25 now."

The affair began in the Musicmakers guitar store in his home town of Austin in 2008. "I just walked in, picked the Casino up off the rack, plugged into a Super Reverb and it was game-on from there. I still use it. I threw a Bigsby on, and that's about all I've done to it. I get carried away sometimes and abuse the Bigsby. It does make it go out of tune and outta whack, but it's fun!

"The Casino changed my approach. I keep feeling inspired every time I pick one up. Hollowbodies just make me play differently. I love the way that Casinos can be sweet and mellow, and then you slip it down to the bridge pickup and they just bite and scream at you. Often, I like sitting around and playing unplugged. Basically, it got me closer to the music that I loved when I was first playing guitar, like T-Bone Walker and BB King. I use my Gibson 330 from time to time; it's a lot lighter and it bites a little more, but the tone is not quite as rounded as the Epiphone."

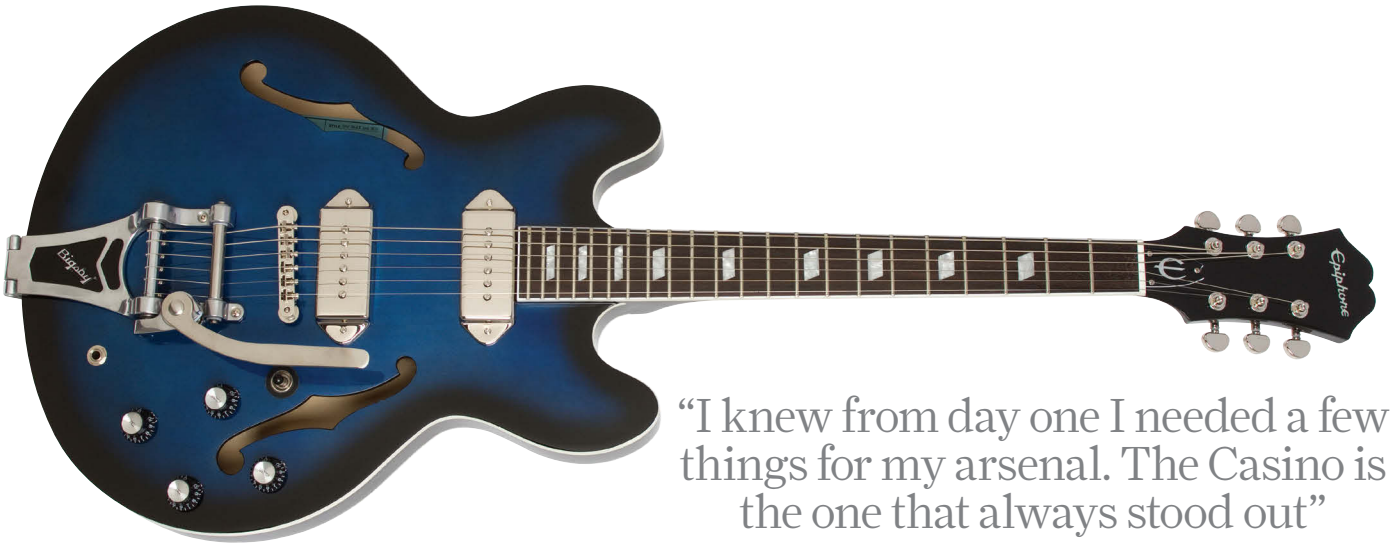
> "The Casino changed my approach. I keep feeling inspired every time I pick one up. I've got about 20 or 25 now"

Fast-forward to the present day and we've caught up with Gary again, to hear all about his "Blak & Blu" signature model and why the Casino is still his one true love...

Q Now you've got your own signature Limited Edition Epiphone "Blak & Blu" Casino, named after your debut on Warner Brothers. Where did the title come from?

"It's kind of an idea I had in my head that would be a good title for a record. And I didn't put this together until later, that The Rolling Stones had an album called *Black And Blue*. So I put it out and someone said 'what do you think about this?' and I thought 'oh gosh (laughs), that's cool'. But you can take it just literally for what it is or what it isn't. It's just Blak & Blu – here's an introduction to myself. Here I am."

Clark Jr estimates his Casino collection at "about 20 or 25"



"I knew from day one I needed a few things for my arsenal. The Casino is the one that always stood out"

Q We've seen you on stage with a few other guitars, but mostly Casinos. Do you buy a lot of guitars when you're on the road?

"I'm not really instrument-crazy. For somebody who has a lot of instruments, I've been very fortunate that people have laid these nice gifts upon me."

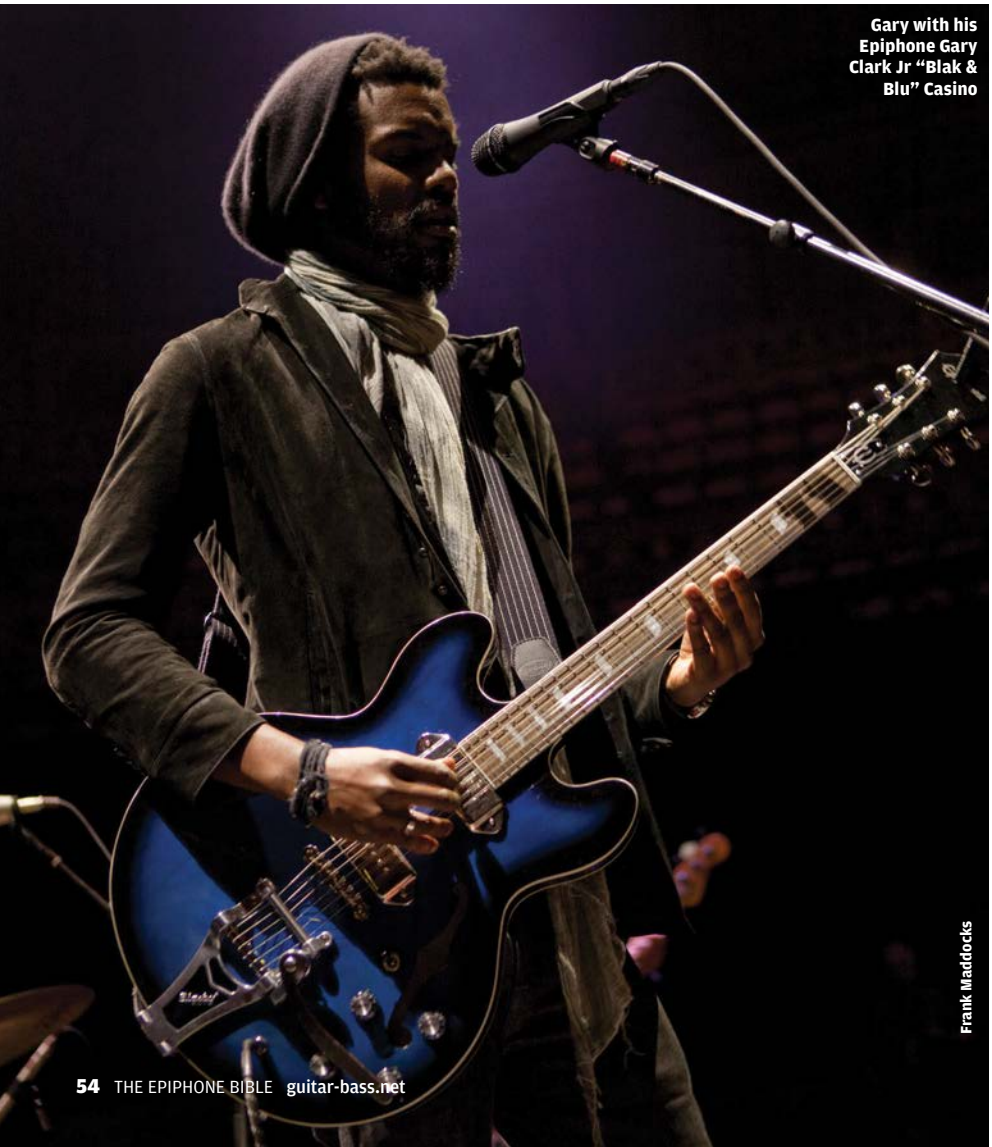
Q Was the Casino always your main electric instrument?

"I pretty much knew from day one that I needed a few things for my arsenal. The Epiphone Casino is the one that always stood out. I'd always go out and pick one of those in a store when I would go to Strait Music or Ray Hennig's Heart Of Texas Music down here in Austin. It always stood out, but I never had the money to get one.

"Then, finally, I scraped up some change and got one, and the Casino changed my life. I knew that was what I needed to have. I had my eyes on it before I even really got familiar with it. And it just kind of stuck. I'm good with that. It's cool to have a Blak & Blu guitar, do you know what I mean? To have the guitar I've always wanted and to be able to customise it – 'what if it was this colour?'. It's surreal to see it all happen.

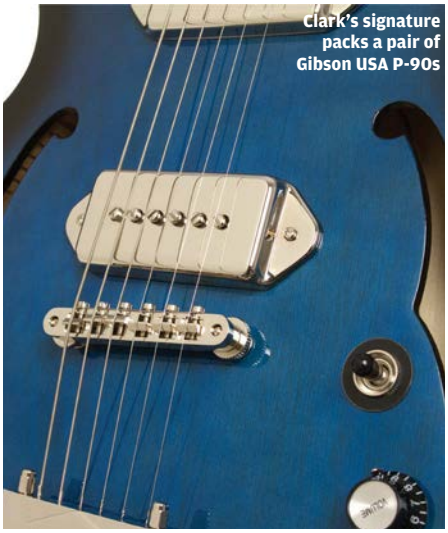
"I didn't put anything extra on it. I like things as-is, you know? Whatever it is right off the shelf. The paint job was everything. I could have painted it myself, but I went the professional route and let the guys who made it do the painting (laughs). Everything is pretty much as it would be. To be honest, I loved the original prototype.

"I absolutely love these guitars. I like putting them on stands and chairs and just looking at them!"



Gary with his Epiphone Gary Clark Jr "Blak & Blu" Casino

Frank Maddocks



Clark's signature packs a pair of Gibson USA P-90s

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Ross Vincent

Back In Black

The man whose riffs changed the course of rock history forever is a demonic devotee of the twin-horned SG. Here, we find out more about his latest Epiphone signature model, and his life in Black Sabbath

Black Sabbath are perhaps the most influential rock band of the last 40 years – ever since Tony Iommi singlehandedly changed the sound of rock 'n' roll guitar in 1970, when Sabbath released their debut album. The sound of 70s rock can largely be credited to Iommi, who is known by fans and writers as the Godfather Of Heavy Metal.

Iommi was born 19 February, 1948 in Birmingham, England. Inspired by Hank Marvin and The Shadows, he began playing guitar (left-handed) as a teenager. After losing the tips of two fingers on his right hand in an accident at his job in a sheet-metal factory, a friend told a despondent Iommi how Django Reinhardt overcame severe burns to the fingers of his left hand. So Iommi continued to study guitar with soft plastic tips at the end of his fingers and began working with the group Polka Tulk (later called Earth) with bassist Terry 'Geezer' Butler, drummer Bill Ward, and vocalist John 'Ozzy' Osbourne. The band changed their name to Black Sabbath (the English translation of the Italian horror film *I Tre Volti Della Paura*), and released their debut album in 1970.

Iommi has battled cancer over the last few years, but fans will not let the band go quietly. In 2015, Tony appeared at the Epiphone booth at Musikmesse to preview his stunning Epiphone Ltd. Ed. Tony Iommi Signature SG featuring Gibson USA Tony Iommi humbuckers. And when news of his appearance got out, Musikmesse became an 'Iommi-fest' as fans (and exhibitors) abandoned the show to wait in line just to get a glimpse of the man who, for many, is the definitive rock guitarist.

Tony is a longtime friend of Epiphone, and developed his first signature model in 2005. For his latest Epiphone Signature SG, Iommi worked hard with Epiphone's luthiers to make a guitar that his fans could rest assured came with his seal of approval.

"This particular one is very different than the last one we did," said Iommi of his new Epiphone Signature SG. "It's a real classic-looking guitar and it sounds great. Jack socket at the bottom. And I like the way the frets feel. This Epiphone sounds like I want it to sound on stage. And it's got my pickups, which we worked on for quite a while. They're based on an original pickup that I designed way back, years ago. And Epiphone and Gibson have copied it exactly. I play it at home in the studio... it's really good."

> "I wanted a top-quality guitar I'd be able to use on stage – and that everybody that buys one would have exactly the same as I use"

We spoke with Tony about his life on the inside of Black Sabbath, writing those riffs, and his guitar inspiration...

Q Tony, you've helped to design and customise guitars before. What did you want to do differently with your new Epiphone Ltd. Ed. Tony Iommi Signature SG?

"I wanted a top-quality guitar that I would be able to use on stage – and that everybody that buys one would have exactly the same as I use. I believe that the quality of my newest Epiphone is top-notch. And it should certainly not be looked on as a cheap-quality guitar, because it is not."

Q You've had a long relationship with Epiphone and Gibson. How did that start?

"I first started using the Gibson SG in 1968, when we recorded our first album, *Black Sabbath*. Before that, I always used a Stratocaster. When we started to record our first album, I recorded one track, *Wicked World*, with the Fender and then the pickup went faulty, so my spare guitar – which I had never used before and had just recently bought – was the SG.

"After recording the whole of the rest of the album with the Gibson SG, I never went back to the Fender again. I stuck with the Gibson SG from then on. That became our trademark sound. My relationship with Epiphone came through Gibson when I was asked to do an Epiphone Tony Iommi SG."

Q Is it still easy to write for Black Sabbath, or do you have to put yourself in a frame of mind to write for the band?

"No. I come up with riffs all the time when I'm at home or on the road. I'm lucky to be able to do it naturally. It's what I do. These days, I'm lucky to still be able to play."

Q What other kind of guitars do you like to play when you're away from your SGs?

"I've got a wide variety of guitars at home. Mostly, in the house, I tend to play my acoustics, and in the studio I play one of my many Gibsons or Epiphones. I don't listen to music for inspiration – my inspiration comes from within."

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Max Cooper

Heaven Brent

The Flying V has always been the guitar of choice for Mastodon's Brent Hinds and he's now joined the ranks of Epiphone signature artists with his own Custom Flying V. He tells us how it came about...

Over six albums and nearly two decades in the music business, Mastodon have amassed commercial success, appeared on late night US national TV with Conan O'Brien and David Letterman, enjoyed Grammy nominations, appeared (appropriately) in *Game Of Thrones* and earned a fanatical worldwide fan base.

The Atlanta, Georgia metal band formed in 1999 when Brent Hinds and Troy Sanders met Brann Dailor and Bill Kelliher after the former pair's first band, Four Hour Fogger, had split. Their first album, *Remission*, was released in 2002, immediately putting the band on the musical map.

The band's spiritual leader and frequent lightning rod Hinds is an incredible guitarist – fast, soulful and emotional. He became an Epiphone signature artist earlier this year, when the company released the Epiphone Ltd. Ed. Brent Hinds Flying V Custom, with a mahogany body and a Silverburst finish and a mahogany neck with the same profile as the original historic Flying V first released in the late 50s.

Flying Vs have long been among Brent's favourite guitars, and his new Custom Flying V has a mahogany neck with a 24.75-inch scale length, a '1958' rounded profile and is hand-set and glued in. The ebony fingerboard has a 12-inch radius with pearloid block inlays and 22 medium-jumbo frets. The classic 'V' headstock has pearloid 'split diamonds' with the now-famous 60s-era Epiphone logo. On the back of the headstock is Epiphone's 2016 Limited Edition symbol and Brent Hinds' signature 'skull' logo. The body has seven-layer binding of alternating pure white and black, while the headstock and the pickguard have five-layer pure white and black. The truss-rod cover has the Gibson/Epiphone bell shape with two-layer (black/white) binding and 'Brent Hinds' in white. We caught up with Brent to hear his thoughts on its production.

> "I love Flying Vs. They're cooler than all the other guitars – that's why I love them"

Q What went through your mind when you were given the opportunity to design a signature Flying V with Epiphone?

"What went through my mind is I should have had one when I was 30, not when I was 42. They took their sweet time! I'm just kidding. I love Flying Vs. They're cooler than all the other guitars – that's why I love them."

Q Did you have any advice for Epiphone when you started planning the guitar?

"Yeah, I just said, 'here is the one to copy, take all the radius specs of it and make it exactly like this one, you bunch of geniuses'. And they sent me about about three or four wrong ones... But I ended up liking those more. And now it's perfect. Like I said, they are a bunch of geniuses. That's the way it works, sometimes. Thanks for everything, Epiphone. I mean it. Thanks for my Flying V. I love it. It rocks, man."

Past Masters Remastered

After a hiatus of about 70 years, Epiphone is back in the quality acoustic-archtop business. They may look like relics of the Jazz Age, but these Masterbilt Century models combine deference to the past with modern convenience – as **HUW PRICE** discovers

Although we may associate the Epiphone brand with Gibson's budget electrics and acoustics, Epiphone was once one of the great names of American guitar making. Many of the Epiphones produced from the late 50s onwards have been fantastic instruments in their own right, but the Masterbilt Century archtops represent an attempt to alter perceptions by revisiting Epiphone's pre-war golden era.

A considerable effort has gone into getting it right, and the evidence is in the details. The tailpieces have an aged but not distressed look, the fingerboard edges are softly rolled for player comfort, vintage-style fretwire is used and period decorative motifs have been revived.

The finishes have a soft sheen rather than high-gloss and they look to have been applied thinly. Check the specs and you'll find that body dimensions, longitudinal bracing and materials are all accurate, too – including solid spruce tops. Perhaps most impressive of all are the repro tuners. Epiphone has gone all out for a vintage look, with 'E' branding and period-correct buttons, but under the covers the gears are tweaked for a more modern 18:1 ratio. >

EPIPHONE
OLYMPIC
MASTERBILT
EPIPHONE
ZENITH
MASTERBILT

Epiphone Masterbilt Century Olympic, Zenith & De Luxe

Fortunately, adherence to the past combines with an up-to-date Shadow NanoFlex HD under-saddle pickup and an eSonic HD preamp and stealthily concealed volume and tone controls. A combination jack socket/battery compartment is tucked under the tailpiece hinge.

Masterbilt Olympic

You could describe the Olympic as the most basic model, but I don't mean that in a derogatory sense, because that's the way Epiphone made Olympics back in the 30s. Binding is single-ply; there's no fretboard binding and the markers are simple pearl dots. Construction is simpler, too, with a mahogany neck, stacked heel and (presumably) a scarf-jointed headstock.

In use

We're off to a good start, because the Olympic is a box of sheer fun. The experience of playing an out-and-out archtop acoustic with a solid soundboard is entirely different from a regular flat top. I would describe the Olympic's tone as very midrange-focused, punchy and percussive, and possessing a slightly boxy clanginess that makes me want to keep playing. It also does an amazing thing whereby clear harmonic overtones bloom across open chords.

The Olympic is a box of sheer fun. we'd describe its tone as midrange-focused, punchy and percussive

In rhythm mode, it's a surprisingly dynamic and solid performer. You can tell that these guitars were designed to pummel their way through an ensemble, and jazz chord inversions sound clear, harmonically coherent and forceful. Before long, I found myself strumming near the neck while comping chords, then shifting my strumming hand closer to the bridge for added dynamic thrust, volume and treble cut.

Moving from jazz voicings to country chords, the Olympic reveals itself to be a consummate rootsy country rhythm guitar. You can pick out basslines and add high inversions as you strum open chords, and everything sounds balanced and clear.

Switch to soloing mode and it's immediately apparent why a 1935 Olympic became David Rawlings' main guitar. Compared to a flat top, the Olympic produces notes with considerably more body, woody sustain and clarity. The tone has such a pretty, keening and evocative character, it's sure to inspire.

It's also wonderfully even across the strings and all along the

The period-correct tuner casings contain modern-spec 18:1 gear ratios that tune easily and hold tight

The Olympic and De Luxe models have their volume and tone controls concealed under the treble-side f-hole

fretboard. So wherever your fingers find themselves, no notes jump out or become subsumed by wolf-y tones, and you can slip effortlessly between solo notes, strummed chords and arpeggios.

Masterbilt Zenith

The Zenith is the next one up – in size only – and its most obvious distinguishing feature is the round and bound soundhole. Nevertheless, this is a bona-fide archtop. Where the Olympic and De Luxe have their controls tucked inside the treble-side f-holes, the Zenith's sit under the bass side of the soundhole.

The neck is a proper jazz-style affair made from three pieces of mahogany and two pieces of maple sandwiched together. The bound ebony fingerboard features 'falling snowflake' pearl markers and the laminated flame-maple body has three-ply binding front and back.

In use

With a round hole, the playing experience will be far more familiar to flat-top owners because the player gets to hear far more of the guitar's tone. With a conventional f-hole, conversely, a lot of the tone gets projected forwards towards the listener and away from the player.

The Zenith's sound is somewhat more familiar, too, with far less midrange emphasis, a more open treble and deeper bass. It seems a fair bit louder, but its sonic character is far less quirky and pronounced.

Where the Olympic's pumped mids and rolled-off treble and bass allow it to occupy a frequency space that's so often vacated by vintage-voiced flat tops, the Zenith seems to encourage you to use a more rhythmic approach, with more right-arm intensity.

It's also fun to play lead lines, but notes don't have quite the same degree of sustain or meaty solidity. On the plus side, there is a bit more action in the upper harmonics, which lends a more ethereal shimmer to chord work and soloing alike.

The Zenith's controls are under the bass side of the soundhole

Masterbilt De Luxe

Although all three of these Epiphone models are supplied with a pickguard to be fitted at the owner's discretion, this was the only one that arrived with a pickguard already attached. True to the exacting standards of the Masterbilt series, it has the right shape and look, with five-ply binding and a mitre joint in the one corner beneath the 15th fret.

Measuring 17 inches across, the body is one inch wider than >

Despite its round soundhole, the Zenith is a proper archtop with longitudinal bracing

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Olympic

The **Loar LH-700-VS £736** has a solid spruce top, maple back and sides and comes with open gear Grover tuners and a case. You'll have to fit a pickup yourself. With an all-laminated wild cherry body, the **Godin 5th Avenue Cognac Burst £498** has a custom French polish finish but no pickup.

Zenith

The **D'Angelico EX-63 £1,249** is a round-hole archtop with a piezo pickup, Grover die-cast tuners and all the traditional D'Addario bling. It's available in natural and sunburst and comes with a case.

De Luxe

The **D'Angelico DAEXL-1A £1,150** is a 17-inch wide archtop that really looks the part and comes with a piezo pickup and a slim neck profile. Unfortunately, the top is laminated rather than solid. Supplied with a floating single-coil pickup, the **Gretsch G9555 New Yorker £611** has a solid spruce top with laminated maple back and sides.

the Zenith's and 2.5 inches wider than the Olympic's. This time, the ebony fingerboard is treated to large 'notched snowflake' markers, but the 'ebonoid' floating bridge is just the same.

In use

With an armful of Masterbilt De Luxe, it would be quite easy to imagine oneself wearing a cheap tuxedo in an orchestra pit, swathed in tobacco smoke with a silent movie playing overhead. It's by far the biggest of this bunch in size and sound, but it combines elements of both the Olympic and Zenith. The De Luxe is the loudest by some margin, but it has the highs and lows of the Zenith combined with the even balance, midrange muscle and sustain of the Olympic. It also has the most refined and sophisticated tone. No doubt you can bash out a rhythm part with considerable cut and gusto, but it responds just as readily to a soft touch that rounds out the bass and allows the extended treble to breathe.

The De Luxe doesn't quite have the Olympic's remarkable evenness but it comes close, and there's a dusting of high harmonics that linger on as single

The De Luxe is the biggest of the bunch and the loudest by some margin. It also has the most sophisticated tone

The De Luxe's pickguard features five-ply binding and really looks the part

Like the originals, the repro tuner buttons are flecked with colour

The flamey figuring on the De Luxe's maple back and sides is vivid and vibey

notes fade leisurely away. It may not quite have the open-throated shout of the Zenith or the Olympic's accentuated sonic character but, simply put, the De Luxe is the best all-rounder.

All three of these guitars are fitted with the same eSonic HD preamp and Shadow NanoFlex HD under-saddle pickup. The pickup system was designed with dedicated acoustic amplification in mind, which typically comes with the kind of powerful onboard parametric EQ that will allow you to sculpt not only the kind of toneful warmth synonymous with the Jazz Age but also much more contemporary acoustic sounds ideal for the modern player.

Output level is high and noise is low, but be mindful that the voicing is relatively bright when plugged directly into a flat-response desk or PA system so you may want to use the instrument's onboard tone control to roll off the high end if you don't have an acoustic amp or preamp on hand. David Rawlings stopped using pickups live many years ago and has since relied exclusively upon microphones but if that's not an option, we're happy to report that although the mids are less full, the bass response retains much of its woody character.

Epiphone has pulled off something spectacular by creating three distinct models that combine modern Far Eastern production with an authentically vintage vibe. The tuners are a triumph, and kudos to Epiphone for going the extra mile. Let's hope one or two other heritage brands will finally be inspired to do likewise.

The gauge of fretwire is perfectly judged and Epiphone has achieved that elusive goal of carving a fat vintage neck profile that isn't unwieldy or clubby. In fact, it's a sheer delight. I would point out that you shouldn't make snap judgements if you get to try one of these.

Even more than a solid wood flat top, these archtops require a few minutes of playing time before they properly warm up. Perhaps the bridge bases could be made to fit the top a little more snugly, but ultimately, I don't think I have ever had so much fun playing archtop acoustics. So which one would I choose? That's a tough call, but when they are eventually returned to Epiphone I think there will be an Olympic-sized hole in my collection.

KEY FEATURES

Olympic

- **PRICE** £499
- **DESCRIPTION** archtop acoustic 6-string guitar, manufactured in Indonesia
- **BUILD** solid spruce top with f-holes and longitudinal bracing, laminated mahogany back and sides, set mahogany rounded C neck, bone nut, rosewood fingerboard with pearl dot markers and 20 vintage-style frets
- **HARDWARE** Aged nickel trapeze tailpiece, floating ebonoid bridge, Historic Epiphone reissue tuners with Marboloid 'Crown' buttons & 18:1 ratio
- **ELECTRICS** Shadow NanoFlex HD under-saddle pickup with eSonic HD preamp, volume and tone controls
- **SCALE LENGTH** 648mm/25.5"
- **NECK WIDTH** 43mm at nut, 55mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 23mm at first fret, 27mm at ninth fret
- **STRING SPACING** 36mm at nut, 54.5mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 2.2kg/4.8lb
- **LEFT-HANDERS** Yes (just spin the bridge around)
- **FINISHES** Aged Gloss Honeyburst and Violin Burst
- **CONTACT** Gibson Europe **www.epiphone.com**

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Immensely characterful tone
+ Amazing sustain and harmonic bloom
+ Very evenly balanced
+ Articulate mid-focused sound
+ Stable tuning

– Rolled-off highs and lows

A wonderful instrument for soloing and chord work that nails the David Rawlings tone for a much lower price than an original

9/10

KEY FEATURES

Zenith

- **PRICE** £599
- **DESCRIPTION** archtop acoustic 6-string guitar, manufactured in Indonesia
- **BUILD** solid spruce top with round sound hole and longitudinal bracing, laminated flame-maple back and sides, set five piece mahogany/maple rounded C neck, bone nut, ebony fingerboard with falling snowflake markers and 20 vintage-style frets
- **HARDWARE** Aged nickel trapeze tailpiece, floating ebonoid bridge, Historic Epiphone reissue tuners with Marboloid 'Crown' buttons & 18:1 ratio
- **ELECTRICS** Shadow NanoFlex HD under-saddle pickup with eSonic HD preamp, volume and tone controls
- **SCALE LENGTH** 648mm/25.5"
- **NECK WIDTH** 43mm at nut, 55mm at 12th fret
- **DEPTH OF NECK** 23mm at first fret, 27mm at 9th fret
- **STRING SPACING** 36mm at nut, 54.5mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 2.3kg/5lb
- **LEFT-HANDERS** Yes (just spin the bridge around)
- **FINISHES** Aged Gloss Vintage Natural and Vintage Sunburst

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Loud, bright and slightly aggressive tone
+ Less 'jazzy', more country/blues
+ Impressive neck construction
+ Higher trim level

– Shorter sustain

A very interesting guitar that falls somewhere between a flat top and an archtop, sonically. Could be good for solo artists who are looking for a different look and sound

8/10

KEY FEATURES

De Luxe

- **PRICE** £729
- **DESCRIPTION** archtop acoustic 6-string guitar, manufactured in Indonesia
- **BUILD** solid spruce top with f-holes and longitudinal bracing, laminated flame-maple back and sides, set five-piece mahogany/maple rounded C neck, bone nut, ebony fingerboard with notched diamond markers and 20 vintage-style frets
- **HARDWARE** Aged nickel trapeze tailpiece, floating ebonoid bridge, Historic Epiphone reissue tuners with Marboloid 'Crown' buttons & 18:1 ratio
- **ELECTRICS** Shadow NanoFlex HD under-saddle pickup with eSonic HD preamp, volume and tone controls
- **SCALE LENGTH** 648mm/25.5"
- **NECK WIDTH** 43mm at nut, 55mm at 12th fret
- **DEPTH OF NECK** 23mm at first fret, 27mm at 9th fret
- **STRING SPACING** 36mm at nut, 54.5mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 2.3kg/5lb
- **LEFT-HANDERS** Yes (just spin the bridge around)
- **FINISHES** Aged Gloss Vintage Natural and Vintage Sunburst

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Full frequency-range tones
+ Most dynamic of the bunch
+ Powerful rhythm sounds
+ Great sustain and cut for soloing
+ Complex upper harmonics and deep bass

– Americana die-hards may want to mic up for maximum authenticity

The best all-rounder in the series, the De Luxe is ideal for jazz, country, rockabilly, western swing and more

9/10

BILT WITH LOVE

G&B recently headed out to Epiphone's Nashville HQ to meet Scott Harrison, the company's R&D Luthier and a key player behind the new Masterbilt Century archtops

Story **Huw Price** | Photography **Joe Supple**

Q Could you explain the key concepts behind Epiphone's Masterbilt series of archtops?
"Inspired by our collection of original pre-1957 archtops, we wanted to get back to the true acoustic roots of the instrument. But we recognised that today's modern player still wanted to be able to plug in. So, we added an acoustic/electric preamp and pickup system voiced to amplify the natural acoustic tone, creating the first collection of archtop 'acoustic/electric' guitars that are designed to be played and amplified as true acoustic instruments."

Q How did you go about recreating these iconic designs?
"Our design and marketing team reviewed Epiphone's vintage archtop models and chose some of the most important, distinctive and desirable features and appointments that we felt needed to be included in the new Masterbilt Century line, to properly capture the historic vintage vibe. While these are not reissues, there are a number of features and appointments that have been painstakingly reproduced from the originals, while keeping a modern level of playability and sensibility."

Q Are the solid spruce tops carved or pressed?
"While many of our vintage pre-1957 Epiphones have carved solid tops, some have pressed solid tops. The tops on the Masterbilt Century line feature a pressed solid-spruce top with traditional longitudinal bracing."

Q The repro tuners look and feel fantastic...
"We have wanted to reproduce these tuning machines for some time now, so when the Masterbilt Century project came up, there was never any question as to what tuning machines we were going to use. Richard Akers, who heads our R&D team, did a great job of capturing the nuances of the original vintage tuners while incorporating modern tolerances and performance, such as an 18:1 ratio."

Q In which country are the Olympic, Zenith and Deluxe being made?
"These are being made at our factory in Indonesia. It's the same factory that is currently making our top-of-the-line flat-top Masterbilt acoustic guitars."

Q Has the neck joint been altered from the original designs?
"The tapered dovetail neck joints are fairly consistent with those of the period originals. We did away with the 'floating' fingerboard support, as modern machining capabilities make it an unnecessary step."

Q Can customers fit pickguards themselves?
"It's not difficult to install the pickguards if you have some very basic woodworking

Epiphone's Nashville HQ contains an amazing collection of vintage models, many of which inspired the new range

skills. But if you are particularly timid in this area, a little professional assistance might not be a bad idea."

Q What type of finish is being applied to the guitars in the range?

"The finish is polyurethane, which is applied using an electro-static painting system. This allows us to have a very thin finish, which does not restrict the instrument's vibration. It's a semi-gloss finish we call 'aged gloss', as it closely replicates the vintage look of 75-year-old guitars!"

Q Your bridge bases contact the top all along their length, rather than resting on 'feet' at each end...

"Yes, we opted for the full-contact bridge base on the Masterbilt Century line for two main reasons: it is more in keeping with the period originals, and it helps disguise and protect the undersaddle pickup element."

Hold the 'phones

The Epiphone name has become synonymous with high-quality, affordable sunburst electro-acoustics, and this trio maintain the trend while adding the revolutionary Min-ETune system. **RICK BATEY** takes a look

Epiphone's long history is full of great-looking sunburst flat-top guitars, from the underrated Madrid and FT series instruments of the 1930s through to the Gibson-owned era and the classic Texans and gorgeous Frontiers of the 1960s. If you love sunbursts, the current catalogue has plenty to choose from, and here we have three under the microscope – all electro-acoustics, but each with a very different role to play.

FT-350SCE

The big news with the FT-350SCE is easy to summarise: this is, Epiphone says, the world's first affordable self-tuning electro-acoustic guitar, as it comes with the Tronical Min-ETune mechanical machinehead system, which offers both standard and dropped tunings. Before we get on to that, the FT-350 is a big, bold cutaway dreadnought that comes in a choice of four colours: Black, Wine Red, Natural and this one, a bright Violin Sunburst. The body is white-bound, there's a super-wide 10-ply band of purfling around the top and more glitz courtesy of a Gibson Hummingbird-shaped scratchplate. With its extra cutaway notch, the guard adds a hint of a Grammer – the kind of guitar a country star might have played in the 60s at the Grand Ole Opry. >

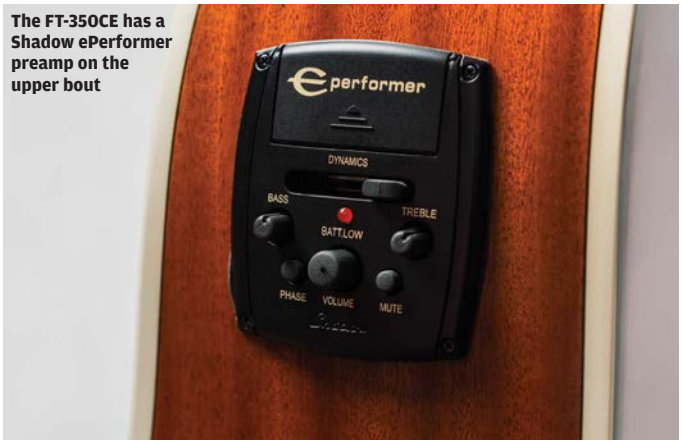
Epiphone
Epiphone

Epiphone FT-350SCE, AJ-45ME/VSS & EL-00 Pro

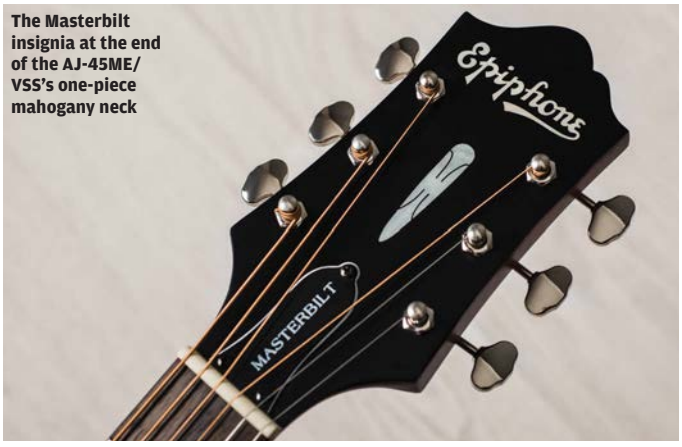
The FT-350CE's back and sides are laminated mahogany, streaky and sapele-like; the top is solid Sitka spruce, clean and fine-grained on this example, although with a strong two-tone contrast between the top and bottom halves, depending how the light hits it (chatoyancy, as it's known). It's a natural side-effect of the way a piece of wood is cut, and nothing to worry about.

The neck is made from three pieces of maple, with a cool-looking dart volute reinforcing the area behind the nut. The scale length is a full 25.5 inches and the white-bound rosewood fingerboard carries dot markers, with one at the first fret – which is unusual.

We've got a 60s-style headstock, and the nut is a Tronical Speednut made of a self-lubricating material. The slim, rounded neck is quite speedy and feels very much like a mid/late 60s Epiphone acoustic neck. The action on ours is medium, with room to come down, and the cutaway is a boon for playing above the 12th fret.



The FT-350CE has a Shadow ePerformer preamp on the upper bout



The Masterbilt insignia at the end of the AJ-45ME/VSS's one-piece mahogany neck

The Min-ETune does what it says on the tin. It's lightweight, unobtrusive and easy to use in the simplest mode

Acoustically, the FT-350SCE is both plenty loud and bright in tone. It's a cheerful and responsive guitar to play and although the bottom E is possibly a touch shy, it's got a nice, forward, articulate midrange that's good for picking notes out of chords.

This guitar comes fitted with a Shadow NanoFlex undersaddle pickup, with a Shadow ePerformer preamp located on the upper bout. This offers volume, bass and treble rotaries, phase and mute buttons (the latter will come into play a lot when using the Min-ETune), and a 'dynamics' slider that seems to operate as a fairly subtle midrange body control. The B and G strings are a touch prominent, but overall it's a good-sounding example of the undersaddle breed. And so to the FT-350SCE's main selling point, the Tronical Min-ETune. This has been around on Epiphone electrics for a couple of years now, and it's fair to say that acclaim has been widespread but not universal. Some players are worried about battery life, or may be concerned about the possibility – however remote – that the electronics may fail and cause a publicly embarrassing moment. Equally, some may feel they can perform tuning duties more quickly by ear, or more accurately with a really good stage tuner.

Those are fair points, but these systems are here to stay and the Min-ETune does what it says on the tin: it's lightweight and unobtrusive. It's easy to use in the simplest mode: just switch on, strum all the strings with your thumb over the end of the fingerboard, wait a couple of seconds and strum again, and if any indicator lights are still red, play that string alone for a final auto-adjustment.

A Gameboy-style four-way controller lets you access three menu banks containing assorted common altered tunings (you can also add your own). You can go into a calibration mode or choose the level

of accuracy you desire; the closer it is, the longer tuning may take, but +/- 2 cents seems good enough for live use. You can tune manually if needed, but be aware that the ratchety-feeling 40:1 ratio gears are slow, and the bass-side tuners work in the opposite way to the conventional method.

The makers claim that the rechargeable li-polymer battery gives 80 to 100 tunes. The fastest big retune we achieved was about 10 seconds, from DADGAD back to standard; the slowest was around 50 seconds, from standard to a very dropped tuning situated a few steps away on a different bank. Do download Tronical's instruction PDF and work through it before you run out on stage, because it's possible to make a boo-boo unless you understand how it works.

Whether this is something you need is a very personal decision. The best thing is to try one in a store, taking special care to go through the menu, replicating what you'll be doing with it – whether swapping between dropped tunings or simple standard tuning tweaks – and see how it rocks your boat.

AJ-45ME/VSS

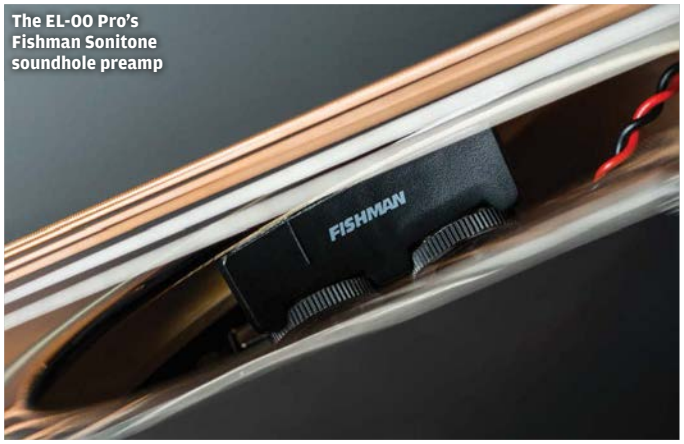
The slope-shouldered dreadnought was introduced by Gibson in the 30s and adopted by Epiphone under the Gibson umbrella in the late 50s, and for many, there's a special character to this kind of guitar that can't be found anywhere else.

The Epiphone AJ-45ME comes with a 'Masterbilt' appendage, referring back to the company's pre-Gibson glory days, and it seems to take inspiration from various eras. The company's use of the term 'AJ' is varied; 'Advanced Jumbo' to us means Gibson, the 30s and rosewood back and sides with a long scale length, but this guitar – essentially a Masterbilt version of a Gibson J-45 – and the Inspired by 1964 Texan are both mahogany, with 24.75-inch scales.

The headstock is authentically 1930s, with an asymmetrical humped shape, a nostalgic pearly 'stickpin' emblem and a curvaceous Epiphone logo with a stylish tail. A set of open-back Grover machineheads fits right in with that pre-war feel. Move south and we leave the 30s behind: the 'upside-down' belly bridge is a feature from 1950 onwards, while the scratchplate has a shape from a post-1955 J-45 or J-50. It's quite oddly coloured, and we'd be tempted to buy a nice, properly bevelled replacement 'guard.

Stepping away from tradition, the AJ-45 has three rosette bands around its soundhole, and the fingerboard overhangs the soundhole with a final bare section that's roomy enough to carry another fret. Classic-era slopes have a space between soundhole and fingerboard that balances the design of the whole guitar; in the Epiphone line, only the Elitist 1964 Texan gets it right. It's merely a small detail, but we miss it.

This is a cleanly built guitar with a good neck angle. The all-over satin finish and the two-tone sunburst top give a practical, working man's >



The EL-00 Pro's Fishman Sonitone soundhole preamp

The Min-ETune system worked well on all three guitars

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

FT-350SCE

In terms of price and auto-tuning, there's nothing presently up against the FT-350SCE, but Gibson has offered a **J-45 Min-ETune £1,899**, and the 2016 catalogue has the **J-45 Progressive $2,999** with G Force tuning, a Tune-O-Matic and PZM pickup.

AJ-45ME/VSS

The **Recording King RAJ-126 £565** is a sunburst slope replica in solid Sitka and mahogany. Epiphone's own **Inspired by 1964 Texan £299** comes with a Shadow NanoFlex; it costs less than the Masterbilt AJ-45, and it also has the correct long scale length.

EL-00 Pro

The **Loar LO-16 £259** is a solid spruce-topped L-00 tribute, available in cool black with a white guard. The **Recording King Troubadour TSR 3 £488** apes the deeper-bodied Gibson Nick Lucas, has a 1.75" nut and is available with a Fishman UST.

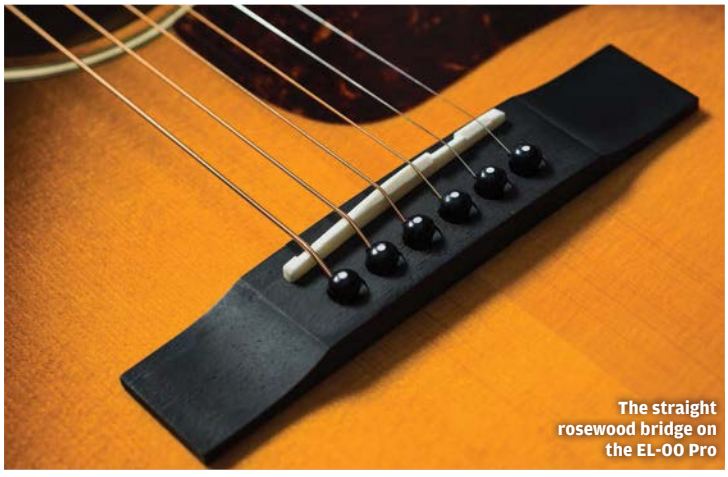
kind of character – and the top really is a quality piece of spruce. You get a mahogany back and sides, too, and Epiphone has gone to the trouble of adding mahogany side strips for added reinforcement.

The neck is also mahogany – it's fairly streaky, but all one piece, with no scarfed-on headstock or stacked heel. With a 14-inch fingerboard radius, very low vintage-gauge frets and Epiphone's slim-meets-chubby 'SlimTaper D profile', plus really well-rounded fingerboard edges and a 43mm nut, the AJ is extremely easy in the hand. It has good intonation and a nice action, with enough room for the saddle to come down a shade.

When it comes to tone, this guitar should be shivering in its shoes right now, because next to it sits a real, beaten-up 1958 Epiphone Texan, and it's a heck of a good one, too. But guess what? The Indonesian model acquits itself very well. It can't replicate the prairie-wide openness of the oldie, nor does it match the complexity of the lower mids and the thickness of the trebles, but it's voiced in the right ballpark, with an easy, loose and open feel. There's a furriness to the strum and a nutty plunk to the bottom end and midrange that is quite slope-shouldered in character, and a heavy-gauge pick makes the most of the fair degree of fatness contained within. It's improving all the time, but it's already a cracking guitar.

A Shadow undersaddle pickup is linked to a preamp with soundhole-mounted volume, treble and bass controls (the tiny wheels are very fiddly, and the centre detents on the tone knobs are almost imperceptible). While it's a touch papery sounding, it's an excellent alternative to the Fishman Sonitone system Epiphone fits to many of its guitars, well balanced from string to string, and with a tonality that's easy to work with. Thumbs up.

The AJ-45ME's mahogany neck is book-ended by a dark heel and headstock



The straight rosewood bridge on the EL-00 Pro

EL-00 Pro

It's always a good day when anything resembling a vintage Gibson L-00 shows up at *G&B*, because it's another of our all-time favourite guitars. The EL-00 Pro brings its own flavour to the party, however, with a smaller soundhole than the Gibson original and a body outline that pinches the lower bout very slightly and brings the waist a fraction further down. It's still very much a pre-war kind of aesthetic, and that two-tone sunburst is gorgeous, while the straight bridge and the super-dark faux-tortoiseshell guard – there's no need for an upgrade here – look great.

This finish is gloss all over, giving a very rich, sophisticated look. The top is solid spruce (and, again, a very nice piece), while the back and sides are laminated mahogany. Realistically, that's entirely to be expected at this impressively low price.

The neck is mahogany, sunbursted at the rear with a dark headstock and dark

heel – and, in common with the AJ-45, there's a strap button ready-installed in the correct position on the side of the heel.

The fingerboard is rosewood with front dot markers and black binding to hide the fret ends, and the scale length is the traditional Gibson 24.75 inches. Up top, we've got the slim 60s-design headstock, backed by a set of enclosed Grovers with small metal buttons, and the nut is imitation bone – as is the compensated bridge saddle.

A neck a little wider than this one might have suited the EL-00 well, but it comes with the standard narrow dimensions of 1 11/16", or 42.5mm. The profile is Epiphone's SlimTaper D, and the little EL is a slick-playing guitar with a well-cut nut and nicely fitted small-gauge frets.

The EL-00 Pro has a Fishman Sonicore undersaddle pickup and the Sonitone preamp with volume and tone wheel controls located inside the soundhole.

This guitar doesn't come over like a 30s L-00, but then (almost) nobody has ever managed to replicate the unique character of those amazing instruments with their super-light build and knife-sharp bracing, all backed up by 80 years or so of ageing. It sounds mild, pretty and contained, with a metallic, boxy nasality, which can work quite well for solo vocal accompaniment or, at a pinch, David Rawlings-type flatpicked leads. It's cute-sounding when used with a capo… hardly fulsome or girthy, but bright with cute, poppy mids. However, with its compact size and slim neck, it's an easy, approachable guitar to grab and play any time you get the chance.

Three very different guitars, then, and they do three very different jobs. The FT-350SCE offers its Min-ETune technology at a price many will find hard to refuse. Whether it's the answer to your wildest dreams or a solution to a problem you don't have is up to the individual, but this is a well-built, voluminous and clear-sounding dreadnought.

The little EL-00 Pro is a very handsome and slick-playing sofa picker; in fact, it's hard to believe that it's so affordable. The AJ-45ME's understated vibe, meanwhile, camouflages a great-sounding, slope-shouldered dread – it's big, open and very responsive. Therefore, it's our pick of the bunch… but as long as Epiphone keeps bringing the 'bursts, we'll be happy.

KEY FEATURES

FT-350SCE

- **PRICE** £459, case not included
- **DESCRIPTION** Flat-top cutaway self-tuning electro-acoustic guitar. Made in Indonesia
- **BUILD** Solid Sitka spruce top, laminated mahogany back and sides, three-piece maple neck with volute, 20-fret rosewood fingerboard, cream binding on body and neck with ornate 10-layer purfling on front, rosewood bridge with imitation bone-compensated saddle, Tronical SpeedNut, second strap button on end of heel
- **ELECTRICS** Shadow NanoFlex undersaddle pickup with Shadow ePerformer preamp with volume, bass and treble rotaries, mute and phase buttons, and dynamics slider; integrated battery drawer; Min-ETune auto-tuning system with 12 factory presets and six user presets
- **LEFT-HANDERS** No
- **FINISH** Gloss all over, four options: Antique Natural, Ebony, Violin Burst, Wine Red
- **SCALE LENGTH** 648mm/25.5"
- **NECK WIDTH** 43mm at nut, 54mm at 12th fret
- **DEPTH OF NECK** 21.5mm at first fret, 25mm at ninth fret
- **STRING SPACING** 35.5mm at nut, 55mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 2.43kg/5.34lbs

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Affordable Min-ETune technology
+ Well-featured Shadow pickup
+ Slim, comfy neck
+ Good-sounding acoustically
+ Cuts a dash onstage

– Battery life may be a concern

If whizzy automatic tuning is a boon for what you do, then the FT-350 is the only thing out there in this price range

7/10

KEY FEATURES

AJ-45ME/VSS

- **PRICE** £439, case not included
- **DESCRIPTION** Flat-top electro-acoustic guitar. Made in Indonesia
- **BUILD** Solid sitka spruce top, solid mahogany back and sides, cream body binding with five-ply purfling on front, none on rear; triple-ring rosette, one-piece mahogany neck including headstock and heel, 20-fret rosewood fingerboard with dot inlays, rosewood bridge with bone saddle, bone nut, Grover Sta-Tite tuners, two strap buttons
- **ELECTRICS** Shadow NanoFlex undersaddle pickup with Shadow Sonic preamp with soundhole-mounted controls: volume, treble, bass, anti-feedback. Takes two coin-type batteries
- **LEFT-HANDERS** No
- **FINISH** Vintage Sunburst only, satin all over
- **SCALE LENGTH** 628mm/24.75"
- **NECK WIDTH** 43mm at nut, 54mm at 12th fret
- **DEPTH OF NECK** 22mm at first fret, 25.5mm at ninth fret
- **STRING SPACING** 36mm at nut, 54mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 2.0kg/4.4lbs

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Acoustically, one of the nicest modern Epiphones we've played
+ Super-comfortable neck
+ Solid woods throughout
+ Shadow pickup is very decent

– Scratchplate lets the side down
– Fiddly soundhole controls

Beneath the plain looks, this AJ is a warm, characterful strummer, flatpicker and fingerpicker. Excellent

8/10

KEY FEATURES

EL-00 Pro

- **PRICE** £229, case not included
- **DESCRIPTION** Flat-top electro-acoustic guitar. Made in Indonesia
- **BUILD** Solid spruce top, laminated mahogany back and sides, cream body binding with three-ply purfling on top only, single-ring rosette, mahogany neck, 19-fret black-bound rosewood fingerboard with dot markers, straight rosewood bridge, compensated imitation bone saddle, mini-button enclosed Grover tuners, two strap buttons
- **ELECTRICS** Fishman Sonicore UST, Sonitone preamp with soundhole vol/tone
- **LEFT-HANDERS** No
- **FINISH** Gloss all over, Vintage Sunburst only
- **SCALE LENGTH** 628mm/24.75"
- **NECK WIDTH** 42.5mm at nut, 55mm at 12th fret
- **DEPTH OF NECK** 22mm at first fret, 24mm at 10th fret
- **STRING SPACING** 35mm at nut, 56mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 2kg/4.4lbs
- **CONTACT** Gibson Europe **www.epiphone.com**

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Very pretty looks
+ Slim neck, good playability
+ Okay sound, although perhaps a little restrained
+ Tempting price

– Laminated back and sides

You can't expect it to have a tone like a pre-war guitar, but it sounds pretty fair, plays well and looks the business

7/10

EPIPHONE LES PAUL STANDARD FLORENTINE PRO £459

ELECTRIC GUITAR

Epiphone Les Paul Standard Florentine Pro

Many see the midrange push of a slab of mahogany as vital to Les Paul tone. **CHRIS VINNICOMBE** hears what happens when you add some air

The popular history of the electric guitar suggests that during the golden era of the 50s and early 60s, the factories of Fullerton and Kalamazoo were churning out lightweight, highly resonant tone machines of a quality that would never be equalled. However, by the 1970s, the pillars of American guitar manufacturing had well and truly lost their way; they weren't making them like they used to, the wood was heavy and sub-standard and in some instances, the Japanese imports of the period were better guitars.

But the trouble with received wisdom is it's usually a little black and white, and its advocates almost always fail to dig into the details. Firstly, the notion that all vintage American electrics of the golden era are great instruments simply isn't true; some pre-CBS Strats are pretty damn ordinary, and not all PAF pickups sound astonishing.

The higher percentage of hand processes involved in early electric guitar manufacture inevitably introduced a greater degree of variance between one instrument off the production line and the next, and those 'Friday afternoon' guitars do exist.

And as far as weight and resonance go, this writer has played a '55 Strat that could have anchored an ocean liner, yet also owned a '73 Tele Custom that weighed less than 7lb and rang like a grand piano.

Not all stereotypes are true then, but it's fair to state that the Les Paul Standard lies at the heavy end of the spectrum when it comes to iconic production solidbodies. It's always been that way, too. Of a sample of 28 1958-60 instruments featured in the Les Paul obsessive's bible *The Beauty Of The 'Burst* by Yasuhiko Iwanade, weights range from 8.1-9.7lb, with an average of 8.86lb. While many Les Paul owners have learnt to grin and bear a reasonable amount of weight, few guitarists want to play a 12lb Les Paul, and there has clearly been a consistent demand for a lighter Lester for a number of years now, as Gibson's numerous attempts to provide one seem to corroborate.

The Epiphone's Slim Taper 60s D profile is a comfortable, speedy player that will appeal to the majority of guitarists

Introduced back in 1987, the Les Paul Custom Lite shaved 5/8-inch off the body depth, while recent years have seen various weight-relief methods appearing on USA LPs, ranging from nine rather crude holes routed in the mahogany before the maple cap is attached to full-on tone chambering. Then there was the halfway house of 2012's 'modern weight relief', with its multiple elliptical chambers.

The f-hole truth

The idea of going the whole hog and equipping a Les Paul with f-holes is nothing new either; the bling-y Les Paul Bantam Elite and Bantam Elite Plus (later renamed Florentine Standard and Florentine Plus; metal flake-finished models were re-christened the Elite Diamond Sparkle) were introduced two decades ago by the Nashville Custom Shop. Noel Gallagher's use of a silver Diamond Sparkle model on Oasis' *Be Here Now* tour was the high point for a range the sparkle of which had fizzled out and been discontinued by 1998.

Since then, there have also been limited edition Epiphone Les Paul ES models and a variety of compact Epiphone and Gibson ES instruments, such as the ES-339, that tend to possess a little Les Paul in their sonic DNA if not in their appearance.

Where the Gibson Memphis ES-Les Paul design employs a maple/poplar/maple laminate frame in traditional ES-335 style, then adds a mahogany centre-block with most of its mass concentrated under the stress points of the bridge and neck join, the Epiphone Florentine here is more of >

KEY FEATURES

Epiphone Les Paul Standard Florentine Pro

PRICE £459 (including hardcase)
DESCRIPTION Single-cutaway semi-hollow electric, made in Indonesia
BUILD Chambered mahogany body with maple top and AAA-grade flame maple veneer, 1960s SlimTaper D-profile mahogany glued-in neck, 304mm/12" radius rosewood fingerboard with pearloid trapezoid inlays, synthetic nut and 22 medium jumbo frets
HARDWARE Nickel LockTone tune-o-matic bridge and stopbar tailpiece, Epiphone Deluxe vintage-style machineheads
ELECTRICS Epiphone ProBucker-3 (bridge) and ProBucker-2 (neck) humbucking pickups, 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, 2x volume with pull/push coil splits, 2x tone
SCALE LENGTH 628mm/24.75"
NECK WIDTH 42mm at nut, 53mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 20mm at first fret, 22mm at 12th fret
STRING SPACING 35mm at nut, 52.5mm at bridge
WEIGHT 6.8lbs/3.0kg
LEFT-HANDERS No
FINISHES Honey Burst (as reviewed), Iced Tea, Faded Cherry Burst, Trans Black, Vintage Sunburst, Wine Red
CONTACT Epiphone
www.epiphone.com

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Epiphone Les Paul Standard Florentine Pro

Epiphone's compact **ES-339 Pro £399** squeezes plenty of ES flavour and a twist of Les Paul into a more compact package. Gretsch's hardtail **G5435 Electromatic Pro Jet £380** features a chambered basswood body and bags of retro growl and jangle, thanks to a pair of Black Top Filter'Tron pickups.

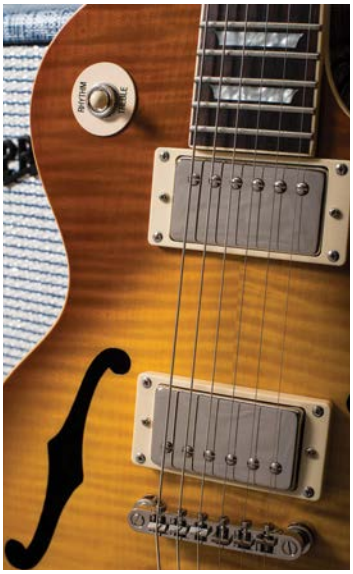
a hollowed-out Les Paul Standard with a chambered mahogany back glued to a maple cap with a pretty AAA flame veneer, though Epiphone's poly finish has that 'dipped in glass', heavy-gloss appearance and feel that's far removed from vintage spec.

In use

The Epiphone's Slim Taper 1960s D profile is a comfortable, speedy player that will appeal to the majority of guitarists. Compared to our reference Gibson ES-335 with Mojo Pickups PAF replicas installed, where the larger-bodied instrument is brighter sounding, with more air, in a straight A/B, as you might perhaps expect, the Epiphone's additional mahogany translates into additional warmth. However, the overall experience is less sophisticated, and as ever the differences between the two instruments get more apparent as you wind up towards gig volume.

All that said, the much more affordable guitar sounds fine in isolation and Epiphone's double vacuum wax-potted pickups are resistant to unwanted feedback and can cope with high levels of gain. In addition, though engaging the coil-splits brings a significant drop in level, there's a sweet, light funkiness to the neck and middle settings, and some almost 60s, Kinks-like brattishness to the bridge when used in split-coil mode with EL84s in overdrive.

Top hat knobs aren't the easiest to pull up with sweaty mitts in a gig environment – speed knobs would have probably been a more practical selection. Having said that, it's to the Epiphone Florentine's great credit that it isn't in any way embarrassed in the company of several Gibsons we compared it to. A versatile extension of the LP format.



Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Great value for money
+ Interesting array of coil-split and humbucking sounds
– Neck dive
– Sound and feel a little generic compared to the 'real thing'

If you fancy a Les Paul but don't want to break either your back or the bank, this is worth an audition. It handles high-gain and high-volume situations well, too

8/10

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Epiphone Ltd Ed 1966 G-400 Pro

Take the basic G-400, add a bunch of new features and finishes and you've got the Limited Edition Pro. Review by **MARCUS LEADLEY**

KEY FEATURES

Epiphone Ltd Ed G-400 Pro

- **PRICE** £348 with Epiphone-branded hardcase
- **DESCRIPTION** Solidbody electric guitar, made in China
- **BUILD** Three-piece mahogany body with laminated mahogany front and back, mahogany set neck with 22-fret rosewood fingerboard featuring trapezoid pearloid inlays. Plastic nut and Wilkinson Vintage Classic tuners. Nickel hardware including LockTone stopbar and Tune-o-matic bridge
- **ELECTRICS** 2x Epiphone Alnico Classic Pro four-wire humbuckers, three-way pickup selector, volume and tone controls. Coil tap on tone control (push/pull)
- **LEFT-HANDERS** Yes
- **FINISH** Alpine White, Pelham Blue, Silverburst, Cherry, Ebony
- **SCALE LENGTH** 24.75"/629mm
- **NECK WIDTH** 43mm at nut, 54.5mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 22.2mm at first fret, 25.6mm at 12th fret
- **STRING SPACING** 35mm at nut, 52mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 2.7kg/6lb
- **CONTACT** Gibson Europe **www.epiphone.com**

Introduced by Gibson in 1961 as the 'replacement' for its single-cut Les Paul model, the SG has become a classic in its own right. Angus Young, Eric Clapton, Carlos Santana, Tony Iommi, Frank Zappa, Pete Townshend, Derek Trucks, Thom Yorke – the list of famous players is practically never-ending. Sound aside, the design has two key benefits: SGs are light, which makes them ideal for anyone who gigs a lot or has a back problem; and the upper-fret access is great, which makes them a real soloist's instrument.

Gibson-branded SGs start at around £500 these days, so it's no wonder that this updated G-400 with an RRP of £348 but a street price of around £260 is catching plenty of attention. As the company is owned by Gibson, an Epiphone version is basically the next best thing. Indeed, the G-400 has been in production since 1989.

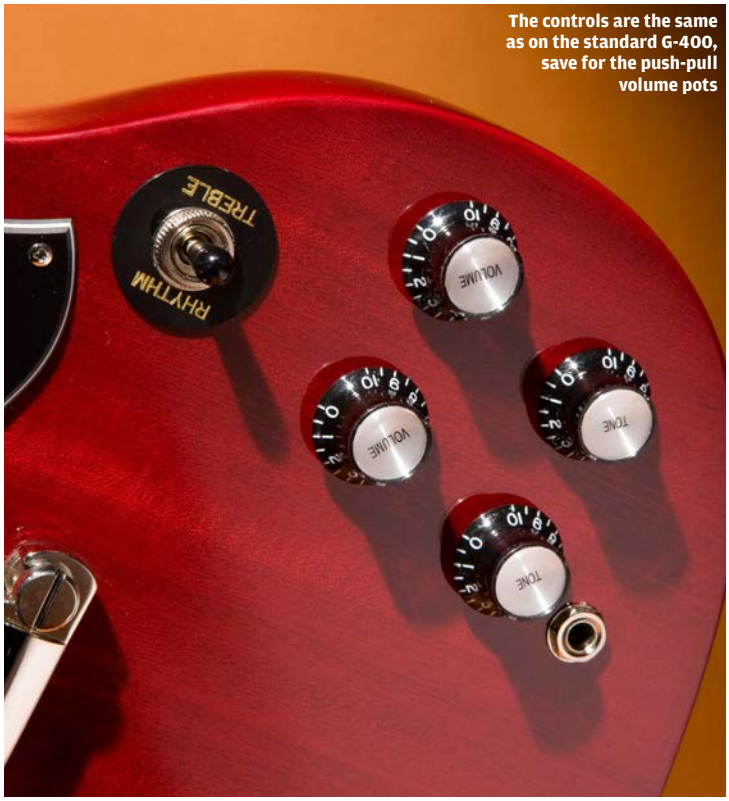
SGs have two key benefits: they're light and they have great fingerboard access, so they're a real soloist's instrument

The basic contemporary G-400 with its small pickguard, alnico pickups and chrome tuners is a homage to the 1962 model, while this latest revision of the Chinese-built instrument pays tribute to the 1966 version – the year the larger 'batwing' pickguard was introduced. You also get Wilkinson Vintage Classic machineheads with the classy green jadeite knobs, and for a contemporary twist – which owes nothing to the mid 60s at all – the humbucker pickups are coil tapped, so you can get single-coil type sounds, too.

The black plastic nut remains; the 60s-era logo truss-rod cover is new

Out go the Grover tuners, in come a set of Wilkinson Vintage Classics

Out of the case, the G-400 Pro looks excellent. The Cherry Red finish shows off the wood's grain very nicely, and it also allows you to see the underlying construction. Paying more for a guitar these days means fewer pieces of timber, and this budget Epiphone is something of a jigsaw puzzle. The body has a three-piece construction; this is not so unusual but, surprisingly, both the front and back of the guitar are laminated to give an even, consistent grain pattern. The heel of the neck, the headstock wings and the back of the headstock are also glued on. None of this is essentially a problem, and indeed, the neck is probably stronger as a result; however, it's unlikely that a multi-piece body will be quite as resonant as one made from a single



The controls are the same as on the standard G-400, save for the push-pull volume pots

A veneered back and front give the look of a one-piece mahogany body

slab. In fairness, however, most Gibson SGs have had two-piece bodies for decades, and contemporary three-piece ones are common, while these days, solid slabs come at Custom Shop prices.

The glued-in neck feels chubbier than the 60s Slim Taper that's specified, but it's a pleasing and not-overbuilt handful. We'd rather err on the chunky side rather than drift towards the type of skinnier neck that became synonymous with Gibson in the 1970s.

The Alnico Classic Pros are refreshingly open and warm, and make the G-400 sound like a more expensive guitar

The rosewood fingerboard is buffed to quite a hard sheen and a little compound has been trapped in the grain. The medium-gauge fretwire is the right choice, and the installation is faultless. The fingerboard isn't bound, but the tangs are hidden. SGs can be a little neck-heavy, but this one balances perfectly on the strap.

In terms of hardware, the G-400 Pro has the basic stoptail and the Tune-o-matic bridge you'd expect. The pickups are Alnico Classic Pros, both of the four-wire variety to facilitate the coil tap, which is activated by the push/pull action of the individual volume controls. We were half expecting to find miniature pots hiding inside the control cavity, so the full-size 500k components and very solid switchgear all came as a pleasant surprise.

In use

The G-400's fully humbucking clean tone is surprisingly good: not at all boxy on the bridge setting and the twin-pickup and neck-pickup sounds are refreshingly open with an unexpectedly warm bass response. Really, this does sound like a much more expensive guitar. In terms of clarity, these clean voices definitely outperform the vintage soupiness of some of their Gibson equivalents. SGs are practically born to rock, so it comes as no surprise that winding up the gain makes a good thing even better. The G-400 Pro moves effortlessly between the realms of electric blues and jazz and on into the territory of metal and hard rock. The bridge pickup is a real screamer, with just the right amount of pick-edge tone for articulation and nuance. There's bags of sustain when you need it, and big chunky rock chords have the right amount of swaggering authority.

The coil-tapped single-coil tones are initially less impressive, as there's an inevitable volume drop when you pull the switch. To really make use of the feature you need a booster pedal or even a graphic EQ pedal, as the natural sound is too bright and toppy. With a bit of a push in the bass/mid frequency range (or, alternatively, a bit of treble cut) you can create a fair approximation of a P90-style tone, which is very useful indeed. The guitar's tone controls are functional but not especially responsive.

It's hard to knock this Epiphone. The price is very good, and the guitar is well made and sounds great. However, if you're a full-time humbucker player and a coil tap doesn't appeal – and you're not that fussed about the look of the larger pickguard – then it's worth checking out the basic model as well. You could buy the lower-cost guitar and spend the difference on a professional setup and maybe have the plastic nut replaced with a bone one. This said, the G-400 Pro we were supplied with has a near-faultless setup.

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Convincing tones from both pickups
+ Comfortable chunky neck
+ Beautiful finish
+ Excellent value for money
- Coil-tapped single-coil tones are slightly underwhelming

An incredibly well-made guitar at a highly attractive price. It's hard to find fault with the SG G-400 Pro

9/10

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Gibson's entry-level SG contender, the **Gibson SGJ £499** has a mahogany body and set neck with a pair of Modern Classic alnico humbuckers voiced to replicate vintage PAFs. The **ESP Ltd Viper-256 £359** has a slightly different body shape but unmistakable heritage, a mahogany body and a set neck with 24-fret fingerboard, plus ESP LH-150 pickups. The **Vintage VS6 £279** is a basic but well-built and powerful homage to the SG. It features a small pickguard and quality Wilkinson hardware throughout, including humbucking pickups.

EPIPHONE SLASH SIGNATURE LES PAUL £699

ELECTRIC GUITAR

Guitar & Bass AWARD CHOICE 9/10

Epiphone Slash Signature Les Paul

Guns N' Roses guitarist Slash is rarely seen without a Les Paul in his hands. **MARTYN CASSERLY** puts his signature model to the test...

Those with keen memories will recall the Slash 'Snakepit' Epiphone of the 1990s. This updated model, released in 2008, is more refined. The mahogany body has a flamed maple top finished in a dark Tobacco Sunburst – tasty and tasteful. The neck is mahogany, but rather than a standard neck join, this model features a vintage-correct long-tenon joint, which goes deeper into the body to aid sustain.

Epiphone has spec'd the Slash Signature Les Paul with a LockTone stopbar and tune-o-matic-style bridge; it's a good-quality choice and a step up from the standard-issue bridge. Again, the pickups are Seymour Duncan Alnico Pro II humbuckers. This shows a real commitment to quality, as it would have been easy to put in a lower-spec set and it's unlikely anyone would have complained. It's also impressive when you consider the quality of the build and features, then look at the list price of £699 – which will no doubt be a little cheaper in the shops. The Slash is classy, simple and elegant... just like a Les Paul should be.

The Epiphone Slash Signature is a genuinely high-quality instrument and certainly not a second-class alternative

A 22-fret rosewood fingerboard adorns the chunky 50s-shape neck. It's very comfortable, but if you have small hands you will want to try one out before spending any cash. It's no speed machine, and the chubby neck will probably suit old-school rockers more than modern metallers.

The headstock is replete with vintage Kluson-style tuners in classic 'snot' green and a truss-rod cover that bears the legend 'Slash'. The design is essentially the same as any regular Epiphone Les Paul Standard, barring the name on the cover... a shame when you remember that the Joe Perry signature Epiphone had his 'boneyard' design on the headstock.

Sounds

As this is a signature model for the lead guitarist of Guns N' Roses, we won't spend a lot of time on the clean channel – but the Epi is capable of some delightfully big, warm tones on the neck pickup that remind us of the Les Paul's jazz heritage. With overdrive cooking, this guitar produces some wonderful guttural tones that allow you to get down and nasty. Soaring leadlines hang in the air for hours, and edgy, spiteful chords bite at your ankles as they rush out of the amp. There's maybe not as much rasp as you get from a regular Les Paul, with the pickups exuding a smoother edge, but it still sounds absolutely cracking.

Verdict

Though the chambered body and higher-grade wood used on the Gibson Slash USA Signature Les Paul produces a more airy and spacious sound, the Epiphone is no poor cousin – and it's a grand cheaper; it offers a slightly darker, more gnarly voice, which you may even find preferable.

The further up the price scale you go, the more you have to pay for timber and smaller increments of finesse and tone, and it's our opinion that the Epiphone offers considerably better value for money than the Gibson equivalent. It's a genuinely high-quality instrument and most certainly not a second-class alternative.

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Excellent build quality for the price
+ Comfortable chunky 50s-shape neck
+ Tune-o-matic-style bridge
+ Seymour Duncan humbuckers deliver a range of high-quality tones

- Doesn't deviate from regular Les Paul Standard design

A brilliant value-for-money offering that's more than fit to bear Slash's name

9/10

KEY FEATURES

Epiphone Slash Signature Les Paul

- **PRICE** £699
- **DESCRIPTION** Solidbody electric, made in China
- **BUILD** Mahogany body with quilted maple top. Mahogany neck with a long-tenon joint. Rosewood fingerboard, 22 medium jumbo frets
- **ELECTRICS** Twin Seymour Duncan Alnico Pro II humbuckers. Two master volumes, two tones, three-way selector switch
- **LEFT-HANDERS** No
- **FINISH** Tobacco Sunburst
- **SCALE LENGTH** 24.75"/629mm
- **NECK WIDTH** 42mm at nut, 52mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 20mm at first fret, 23mm at 12th fret
- **STRING SPACING** 35mm at nut, 51mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 8lbs/3.62kg
- **CONTACT** Epiphone 0800 4442 7661 **www.epiphone.com**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

The **PRS SE Singlecut £499** has twin humbuckers, smart looks and the usual excellent PRS quality. The **Tokai ALS75Q £799** is an LP-style guitar from one of the best makers around, and the **Epiphone Slash 'AFD' Les Paul Special-II** at a mere **£159** offers budding Slashers a fantastic value-for-money entry point.

Slash of Guns N' Roses playing his Epiphone Slash Appetite Les Paul Standard signature model, inspired by the guitar he played on *Appetite For Destruction*

Getty Images

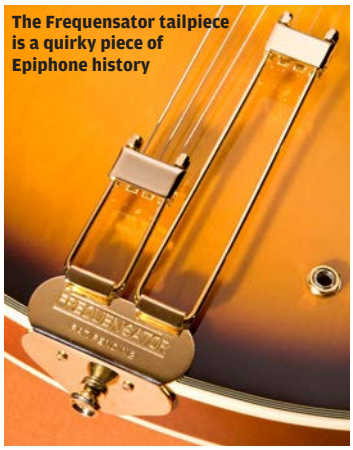
Guitar & Bass AWARD CHOICE 9/10

Epiphone 50th Anniversary 1962 Sheraton

The dawn of the 60s brought new ideas for Epiphone, and this reissue is a fine thinline semi-acoustic. Review by **RICHARD PURVIS**

At Epiphone, the 1950s had brought strikes, deaths and ultimately a buyout by its main rivals, Gibson. The future was to lie in alternative versions of the new parent company's models, and some say that original designs such as the Sheraton would prove to be little more than a short postscript to the proud Epiphone story...

If you've made it this far through *The Epiphone Bible*, you'll already be aware of the impressively long list of big-name artists to have embraced Epiphone's post-takeover semi-acoustics. This Epiphone Sheraton is one of a range of 50th Anniversary Epis that appeared in 2012. The 'anniversary' concept is a bit hazy – all the guitars in the line had already been around for at least two years in 1962 – but it could be seen simply as a celebration of the moment when all were at their most desirable spec. Launched at around the same time as Gibson's own ES-335, and sharing the same body shape, the Sheraton featured elaborate binding and inlays that made it the more classy of the two models. By '62, the original single coils had been switched to mini-humbuckers, and that's what we get here – US-made Gibson ones – as well as a lavish helping of pinstripe binding, a botanically questionable 'tree of life' headstock inlay and a bling-athon of gold hardware, including Grover tuners. The long 'Frequensator' tailpiece is a snazzy vintage touch, and the quality of finish is way better than we've any right to expect from a Chinese guitar.



The Frequensator tailpiece is a quirky piece of Epiphone history

In use

The Sheraton's unplugged sound is quite clanky and bass-light; add mini-humbuckers to the equation and woolliness is not going to be a problem. Amplified, it sounds a lot like an SG; it has a similar tonal balance and the same sweetness in the middle position, though it's a more open and relaxed voice. The wound strings have a great thump to them, and even on the bridge pickup only a hint of harshness on the high E string – emphasised greatly by adding distortion – detracts from the smooth, 335-like purity. Trapeze tailpieces can make note bending a strain, because of the extra string length behind the bridge; this two-part design helps, but not as much as the bony-fingered might hope. Overall, the Sheraton is an easy player, but you probably wouldn't buy a guitar like this for widdly workouts – and rightly so.

Amplified, it sounds a lot like an SG; it has a similar tonal balance and the same sweetness in the middle position

This guitar – designed to look, feel and sound 50-odd years old – proves that the past has a great future. It's nice to see that the Epiphone's heritage has not been forgotten.

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ High-quality finish that belies the affordable price
+ Comfortable player
+ Mini-humbuckers produce a sweet tonal balance

- Note bending can be a strain

An easy-playing classic that evokes a golden era. 335-like tones and stunning appearance are an enticing proposition

9/10

KEY FEATURES

Epiphone 50th Anniversary 1962 Sheraton

- **PRICE** £599 inc. hardcase
- **DESCRIPTION** Semi-acoustic guitar, made in china
- **BUILD** Semi-hollow body with laminated-maple top and back, mahogany neck, 22-fret bound rosewood fingerboard, Tune-o-Matic bridge and Frequensator tailpiece
- **ELECTRICS** Two Gibson USA mini-humbuckers, three-way switch, independent volume and tone controls
- **LEFT-HANDERS** No
- **FINISHES** Vintage Sunburst (as reviewed), Natural, Cherry 'Tremotone' Vibrato (Cherry finish only), £629
- **SCALE LENGTH** 629mm/24.75"
- **NECK WIDTH** 42.5mm at nut, 52.5mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 20mm at first fret, 21mm at 12th fret
- **STRING SPACING** 35mm at nut, 51mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 3.6kg/7.9lbs
- **CONTACT** Epiphone **www.epiphone.com**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

The **Epiphone Sheraton II £449** is an opulent semi with full-size humbuckers and a stopbar tailpiece. The **Vintage VSA555 £469** has gold hardware and fancy block fingerboard markers, setting this black-only model apart from the thinline archtop crowd.

Epiphone Swingster

Epiphone's Swingster is designed to be a 'rockabilly, jazz and rock hollowbody' – will it tempt the Gretsch lovers, asks **WILL NICHOLAS**

KEY FEATURES

Epiphone Swingster

- **PRICE** £499
- **DESCRIPTION** Archtop guitar. Made in China
- **BUILD** Maple-ply body with spruce top, 22-fret set maple neck with 14" radius rosewood fingerboard, Grover 14:1 ratio tuners, Tune-o-matic bridge and Bigsby licensed trem with Chet Atkins arm
- **ELECTRICS** 2x Swingster humbucker pickups with individual volume and tone controls and three-way pickup selector switch. Series/parallel switching for both pickups
- **LEFT-HANDERS** No
- **FINISH** Translucent Black, Wine Red, Sunset Orange
- **SCALE LENGTH** 628mm/24.75"
- **NECK WIDTH** 42mm at nut, 53mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 19mm at first fret, 21mm at ninth fret
- **STRING SPACING** 3.55mm at nut, 52mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 3.5kg/7.7lb
- **CONTACT** Gibson Europe **www.epiphone.com**

To really understand the roots of rockabilly and early rock 'n' roll, you have to consider that many of the musicians had their roots in jazz and country. Les Paul played country under the guise of Rhubarb Red; Chet Atkins' playing was as sophisticated as that of any hardcore jazzer; and if you're still sceptical, try figuring out the bebop-flavoured solo on *Rock Around The Clock* – many have tried, and most have failed.

The Epiphone Swingster combines traditional jazzbox construction with more contemporary looks and features. The pressed top is 'select spruce', but it's not clear if it's laminated. The back and sides are formed from highly figured maple ply, and if you peer through the f-holes, you can see that even the inside surfaces are figured. Maple is used for the set neck, too, and the 14-inch radius rosewood 'board is treated with multi-ply binding to match the floral inlaid headstock.

The Epiphone Swingster combines traditional jazzbox construction with more contemporary looks and features

The Swingster's hardware includes 14:1 ratio Grover tuners, Tune-o-matic bridge that's pinned securely in place, and a B30 Bigsby with a Chet Atkins-style arm. The beautiful grain of the wood can be discerned through the flawless Transparent Black finish, but the brown rosewood bridge looks a tad incongruous with this colour scheme... real ebony or even just some black stain might have been better.

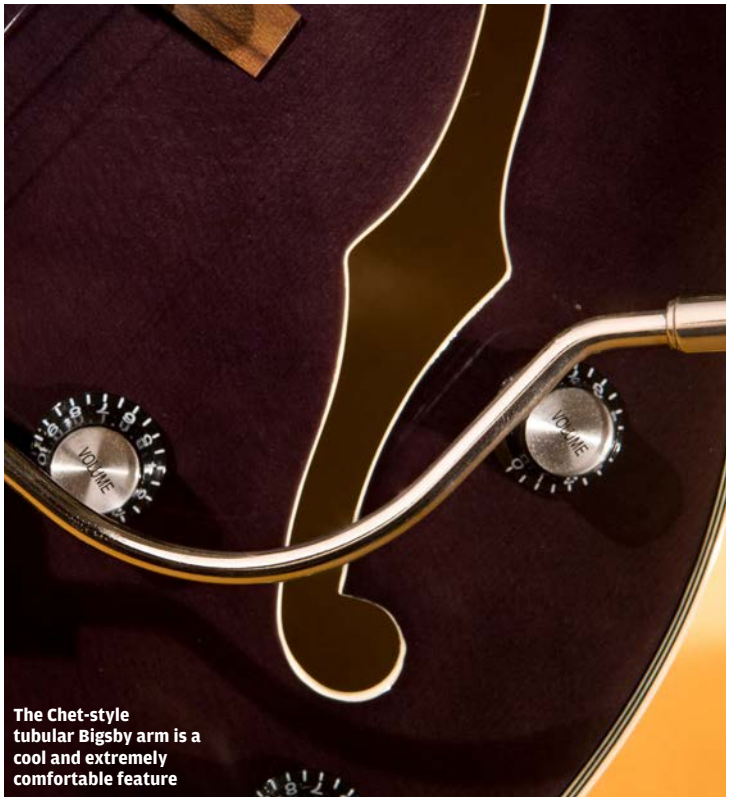
Plenty of pickup manufacturers sell Filter'Tron-type pickups that drop into a regular PAF-style surround. Without trying them all, there's no way of telling whether some attempt has been made to make them sound like the Gretsch originals, or if the only resemblance is the shape of the cutout on the top of the metal cover. All we know is that these 'Swingbucker' pickups have alnico V magnets, so more on this later.

The headstock is fully bound and carries a classic Epi floral inlay

The Trans Black finish, white binding and flamed maple combine really well

Sound

Considering their original raison d'etre as acoustic guitars with added pickups, modern archtops can be a mixed bag when played unplugged. Good news: the Swingster is a real pleasure to play unamplified. The tone is mellow, even and sweet, although not especially loud. A heavier set of strings would make



The Chet-style tubular Bigsby arm is a cool and extremely comfortable feature

Lack of break angle over the bridge is the Swingster's biggest problem

things even better by driving the top harder, and it might also prevent the top E string popping out of its saddle due to the insufficient break angle between the bridge and the Bigsby.

Speaking of which, this Licensed Bigsby produced an absolute cacophony of squeaks and creaks every time it was touched. It's unlikely you'll notice anything untoward when playing through an amp, but it's a bit of a shame, because the Chet-style unusually-shaped arm actually makes for the most comfortable and usable Bigsby experience we've ever had. One other minor complaint: the control knobs do pull off quite easily, so in the long term you may need to swap them for knobs with a grub screw.

Trick wiring doesn't always produce ideal results, but we think that Epiphone's decision to make these dual-coil pickups switch between series and parallel is inspired. It seems that parallel is the default mode, and it's a far better option than a coil-tapped humbucker. Series mode has slightly lower output, but a more transparent and open-sounding treble. There's also a phasey midrange scoop that certainly evokes the tone of a genuine Filter'Tron. Series (ie, humbucking) mode sounds bigger, fatter and more full-bodied. The output is marginally higher, but these are not high-output humbuckers by any stretch... they're just sweet, full-bodied and spot-on for jazz or Scotty Moore tones.

In clean mode, this Epiphone's coolest setting has to be when both pickups are combined – one in series mode and the other in parallel. All the inherent woody goodness of the Swingster comes through, and it's fabulous stuff with an added dose of reverb and tremolo.

With both pickups combined, all the woody goodness comes through – fabulous stuff with reverb and tremolo

Feedback resistance is impressive for a guitar of this type. Although not commonly associated with overdriven and distorted tones, we really like big hollow-bodied guitars with lots of gain for combining big sounds with plenty of tonal depth. We could easily imagine Kirk Brandon and Billy Duffy fans enjoying one of these models – or maybe the white Royale version with the gold hardware and binding. It's also a fine blues instrument, so long as you have the chops to deal with shorter sustain than you'd get from a solidbody.

Verdict

We like this guitar a lot – and, considering the UK street price, it's amazing value for money. The slim neck may divide opinion: the majority of players will probably like it, but we thought it felt a bit mismatched given the size and style of the body. The Swingster would also be an even better guitar with a bit more break angle over the bridge; it needs a neck with more back angle or a B7-type Bigsby with an angle bar at the front to stop the strings popping out of their saddles.

Besides that, though, the Swingster looks, feels and sounds like it should cost at least twice as much. The workmanship is excellent and Epiphone is using fine quality materials for the inlays. There's also scope for easy modifications to be carried out, but it's actually just fine as it is. Besides the glitzy Royale version, the Swingster is also available in orange and red – but we think it looks best in black.

Guitar Bass VERDICT

+ Fantastic value for money
+ Good feedback resistance
+ Versatile tones
+ Very playable Bigsby

- Shallow break angle
- Slim neck may be divisive

The Swingster is a well-put-together archtop that will satisfy guitarists ranging from jazz to rockabilly styles

9/10

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

The **Ibanez AFS75T-TRD £545** is a handsome thinline single-cut jazzer in Tobacco Burst or Trans Red with a maple body, a mahogany neck, ACH1 and ACH2 humbuckers and a vibey VBF70 tremolo. The price includes a gigbag and strap. **Hagstrom**'s **HJ500 Tremar £575** is a glitzy medium-depth single-cut model with twin humbuckers, all-maple construction, plus a Resinator wood fretboard and a traditional double-bar Hagstrom Tremar tremolo. The **Gretsch G5420T Electromatic £562** is a decent single-cut Gretsch hollowbody for decent money, with hump-block inlays, two blacktop Filter'Tron pickups, an Adjusto-matic-topped rosewood bridge, licensed Bigsby B60 vibrato and open back tuners.

STAR GUITAR
THOM YORKE

Getty Images

Thom Yorke of Radiohead at Primavera Sound 2016 in Barcelona. The single-parallelogram inlays, short headstock and black pickup covers date his Casino 'No1' as (most likely) a late-1962 model

Epiphone Casino
#37361
EPIPHONE
Guitars
Amplifiers
Basses
Cellos
WORLD-FAMOUS
QUALITY
SINCE
1873

Vintage BENCH TEST

CASINO ROYALE

Some of the biggest names in pop history have played Casinos, but this is one of the rarest of them all. **CHRIS VINNICOMBE** plugs in...

The thinline, hollowbody Epiphone Casino was introduced in 1961, two years after its close cousin, the Gibson ES-330. Though the Casino wouldn't go on to become as big a seller as the ES-330 (production of which peaked at 4,898 in 1967, versus the Casino's 1,814), Epiphone shipping records indicate that in its year of introduction, the company shipped a healthy 110 E230T single-pickup, 176 E230TD twin-pickup and 153 E230TDV twin-pickup models equipped with the company's Tremotone vibrato tailpiece.

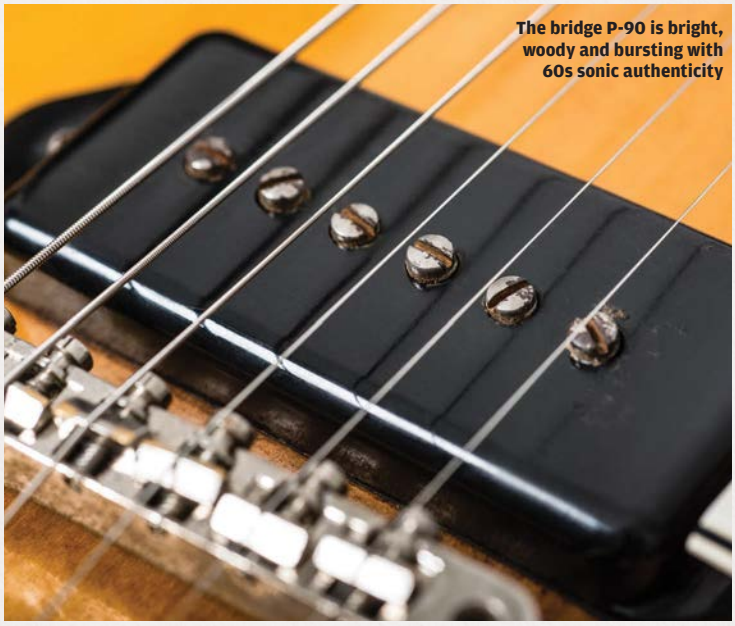
Our Casino's serial number suggests it's one of the 176 E230TD models to leave Kalamazoo in 1961

Our Casino's serial number – 37361 – and trapeze tailpiece suggest that it is one of the 176 E230TD models to leave the Kalamazoo factory in 1961, and its dot fingerboard inlays, black pickup covers and 'short' headstock are also period correct. Single-parallelogram inlays would replace dots in 1962, the black plastic dog-ear P-90 covers were nickel by '63 and the Gibson-like 'open book' headstock outline became thinner and longer in '64.

Though the company's shipping records don't list the colour breakdown for the first year of the Casino's manufacture, the 1961 Epiphone catalogue – in which the Casino resides alongside the shortlived Windsor, positioning what might be the company's worst- and best-known models on the same page – lists the Casino, "dramatic in appearance and tonal qualities, ultra-modern," as being available in Royal >

The Casino's original hang-tag booklet, with 'Special' stamp and handwritten 'RO' denoting Royal Olive

175 other Casino E230TD models left Kalamazoo's production line in 1961



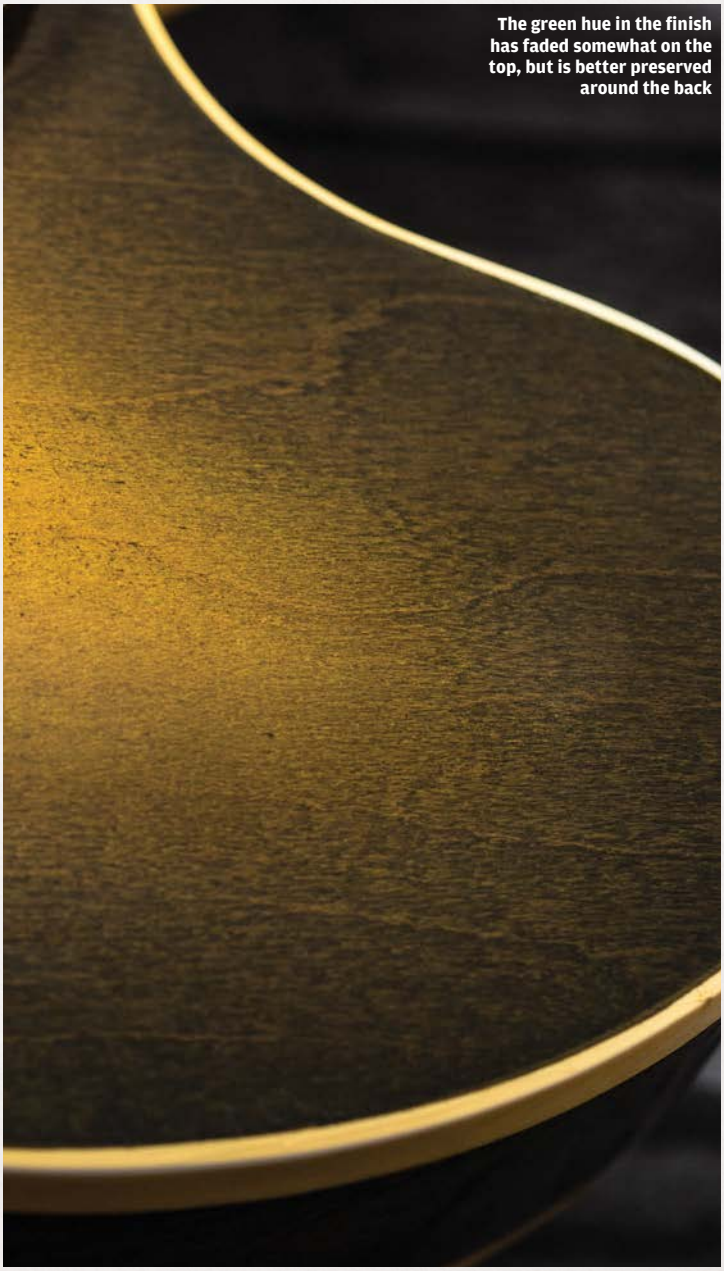
The bridge P-90 is bright, woody and bursting with 60s sonic authenticity

Note two thumbwheels on each side of the Tune-o-matic: likely a factory addition designed to alleviate potentially destructive string tension on the posts

The original trapeze tailpiece

The neck shape feels particularly thin and speedy on many Gibsons and Epiphones of this vintage

The original Kluson Deluxe tuners still function smoothly



The green hue in the finish has faded somewhat on the top, but is better preserved around the back

This headstock outline was superseded by a longer and thinner shape in 1964

Tan or "shaded" (aka Sunburst) finishes. And yet the instrument in front of us is neither sunburst, nor does it have the lighter yellow-orange 'burst of a Royal Tan. As well as its original dark grey, blue-lined hardcase, this Casino comes complete with the original hang-tag booklet, the rear of which is stamped 'special' along with the model name and number, while 'RO' – for Royal Olive – is handwritten.

Royal Olive – a curious yellow-green 'burst with the greenish hue continued around the back where it would usually be brown – was a common-enough finish on the single-cut Sorrento thinline but here, on a Casino, it must have been a special order. Is this the only Royal Olive Casino ever made? It's impossible to say, but it's certainly an extremely rare bird.

Despite carrying out extensive searches for another example, this is the only one that we can find on the whole of the internet, and the only one that the vintage experts we spoke to have heard of. If there are any other Royal Olive Casinos sitting in their cases under beds somewhere, we'd still estimate the total to number only in the single digits.

In use

Regardless of scarcity, this is simply a great hollowbody electric guitar. The first thing that strikes you upon taking it out of the case is the rather slim and flat neck profile, typical of the Kalamazoo factory's output in 1961 when ES-335s and ES-330s gained a new, speedy neck profile, too. That, in combination with the short headstock and lightweight, original Kluson Deluxe tuners means that, despite the fully-hollow body and lack of a vibrato tailpiece, strapped-on balance isn't too neck-heavy. However, like an original ES-330, it's noticeable that these are much lighter and more fragile-feeling instruments than modern reissues. We'd advise reining in those Townshendian influences...

Plugged into a suitably vintage late-50s Fender Vibrolux and a modern Swart AST (itself based on a vintage Gibson circuit), the bridge P-90 proves bright but woody – hard picking down by the Tune-o-matic bridge delivers that twangy early-Stones lead tone with unsurprising yet addictive authenticity, while chiming open-string arpeggios evoke mid-period Beatles with a slightly banjo-like plonkiness that's really evocative of the period. It's pure *Revolver*, even if the actual instruments on that record were a mixed bag.

Winding up the gain delivers creamy lead sounds with real bite when you dig in; it's wonderfully dynamic

Winding up the gain delivers creamy lead sounds with real bite when you dig in; it's wonderfully dynamic. If you can drag yourself away from the bridge pickup, you'll find a beautifully voiced neck pickup that's not too dark, but is nicely smoky for blues-y lead. The middle setting is also really well balanced for 60s rhythm parts and plenty more besides.

Like any vintage hollowbody, controlling feedback can be something of a challenge at stage volume levels, but when you do strike a balance, you are rewarded with musical and moreish feedback and effortless bloom. There's no doubt that an all-original vintage instrument in a rare finish is generally more appealing to the collector than the real-world player, but it would be a shame if this guitar didn't end up in the loving arms of someone who uses it to create music for decades to come. It really is a delight to plug in.

KEY FEATURES

1961 Epiphone E230TD Casino

- **PRICE** £7,850
- **DESCRIPTION** Thinline double-cutaway electric with hollow laminated maple/birch body and mahogany neck. Made in Kalamazoo, MI
- **SCALE LENGTH** 24.75"/628mm
- **NECK WIDTH** 42mm at nut, 50.5mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 19mm at first fret, 22mm at 12th fret
- **WEIGHT** 2.6kg/5.9lbs
- **FINISH** Royal Olive
- **CONTACT** Vintage 'N' Rare Guitars 01225 463777 **www.vintageandrareguitars.com**

Opposite page **The green hue in the Royal Olive finish extends to the back, which would have been brown on regular Sunburst models**

AMPLIFIERS

With the age of the electric guitar came the development of the amplifier. The first amplifiers were quite simple and unsophisticated compared with what we have today. Today's amplifiers offer a variety of special effects such as tremolo, reverberation and ingenious means of combining volume, bass and treble, and the other ingredients of amplified sound. Speaker cabinets are specially designed and multiple speaker combinations are in common use. In many respects perhaps, the amplifier has become more amazing and dazzling than the instrument it was produced to compliment.

The Epiphone amplifier is an instrument of quality, ingenuity and performance. The big sound, the special sound, the sound that is not just for today, but also tomorrow . . . this is the sound of Epiphone, a leader in amplifier electronics.

Case Size	
Speakers	
Inputs	
Channels	
Tremolo	
Reverberation	
Volume Control	
Tone Control	
Foot Switch	
Standby Switch	
Ext. Spkr. Jack	
Monitor Jack	
Tubes	
Removable Fuse	
Pilot Light	
Standby Light	
Polarity Switch	
Diodes	

*15" Jim Lansing
EMPEROR 4T (1
and EMPEROR 6

CONSTELLATION

PANORAMA

ZEPHYR

PATHFINDER

Speakers Corner

Say the word 'Epiphone', and a shapely six-string will coalesce in the mind's eye of most players. However, as **DAVE HUNTER** shows us, the company had business at the other end of the signal chain, and produced a range of amps now coveted by today's collectors

We have no trouble name-checking famous players of Epiphone guitars, easily running the gamut from the jazz age to today. Whether it's Oscar Moore's comping on an Emperor with Nat King Cole, the Casinos beloved of three of The Beatles, Dave Rawlings playing his revived 1935 Emperor with Gillian Welch, or the Casinos and Sheratons donned by Gary Clark Jr, Ezra Koenig, and a whole host of British and American indie-rockers, that big 'E' has made its mark on popular music for a good 80 years.

Now, float the topic 'famous Epiphone amplifier users' and... crickets. Did Epiphone even make amplifiers in the good old days? It certainly did, although it always seemed far more of a second- or third-tier priority for the Manhattan-born instrument makers. Ironic, considering that Epi Stathopoulo – son of the company's founder, its namesake, and the president who transitioned Epiphone into the guitar boom – embraced the electric movement from the very start. There's evidence to suggest that Epiphone released one of the first production amps in existence, the Electar Model-EL, in 1932, although it's difficult to find any documentation on these. But the company's first well-documented amp line came out in 1935 (the same year as Gibson's first 'proper' amp, the EH-135), in the form of the >

> There's evidence to suggest that Epiphone released one of the first production amps in existence

Reissue of the Epiphone Century amp

Electar Hawaiian, so it was in on the ground floor, however you slice it (Gibson also made a few amplifiers as early as 1933, to partner a retrofit guitar pickup, even before its Hawaiian and Spanish electric guitars were available).

Epiphone had a comprehensive, if small, line of guitar amps right up to the time of its acquisition by Gibson in 1957. Several Gibson models were redressed as Epiphone amps after that time, while a few interesting and entirely original models were also devoted to the Kalamazoo-made sister brand, wearing the Epiphone badge only.

The Epiphone Electar range expanded to two models in 1936, the Model M and Model C, which carried 12-inch and 10-inch speakers, respectively. These were rather archaic-looking electric suitcases, covered in grey tweed fabric, with latchable wooden front covers to protect their speakers. The feature makes them look even more like something a travelling salesman would drag door-to-door to peddle his wares, but beneath that flap, they reveal the art deco fretwork 'E' grille that would grace the most famous vintage Epiphone amps, soon to come.

The new Electar line-up of 1939 included the entry-level Coronet, mid-sized Century (the subject of a 75th Anniversary Reissue by Epiphone in 2014), and the large Zephyr. With their polished natural-wood cabinets, scrollwork 'E' grilles, and steel-rod handles, these amps might appear even more old-fashioned than some that preceded them. But they are also icons of early amp design, embodying the look most guitarists are likely to bring to mind when asked to recall a 'vintage Epiphone amplifier'.

From there on out, Epiphone logged little in the amp department that could be considered 'classic', but there were some fascinating models nonetheless. Given the lesser collectability status of many, relative to vintage amps by other makers, they can also sometimes give hard-working guitarists an easy path to semi-affordable vintage tones.

Do watch for the oddball valve complements that equipped some of the later models, though, and assess repair needs carefully before diving in. Let's sample a small selection of interesting Epi amps from throughout the years to see what this alternative might offer us.

> Epiphone had a small line of guitar amps right up to the time of its acquisition by Gibson in 1957

1940 Electar Zephyr

A big boy for its day, the Zephyr delivered around 20 watts from a pair of 6L6 output valves through a 12-inch Rola speaker. It was designed to sit well on the swing-era bandstand, looking much like the podiums that horn players often sat behind, with an elegant flame-maple veneer to its cabinet and darker trim stripes.

The Zephyr exhibited other clever design points, too: it was tilted back slightly for better projection on stage, and had a top-mounted control panel, a rarity for the day, so the guitarist could easily adjust the volume and tone controls when seated behind the amp.

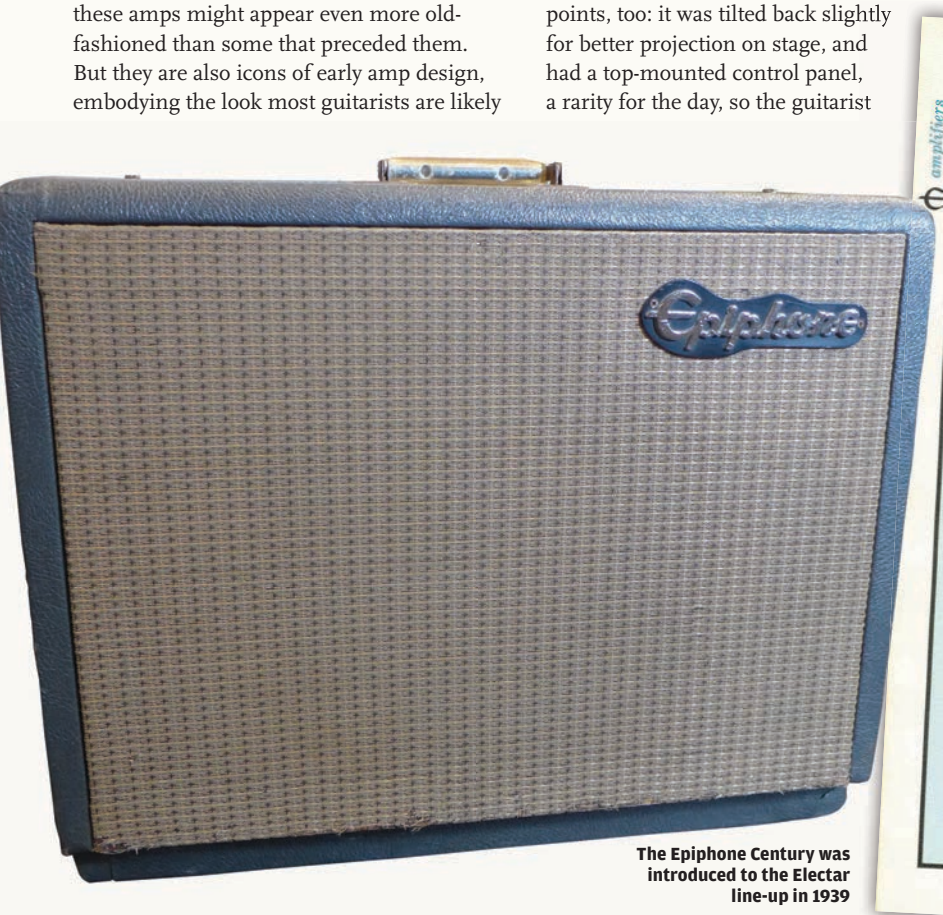
1955 Zephyr

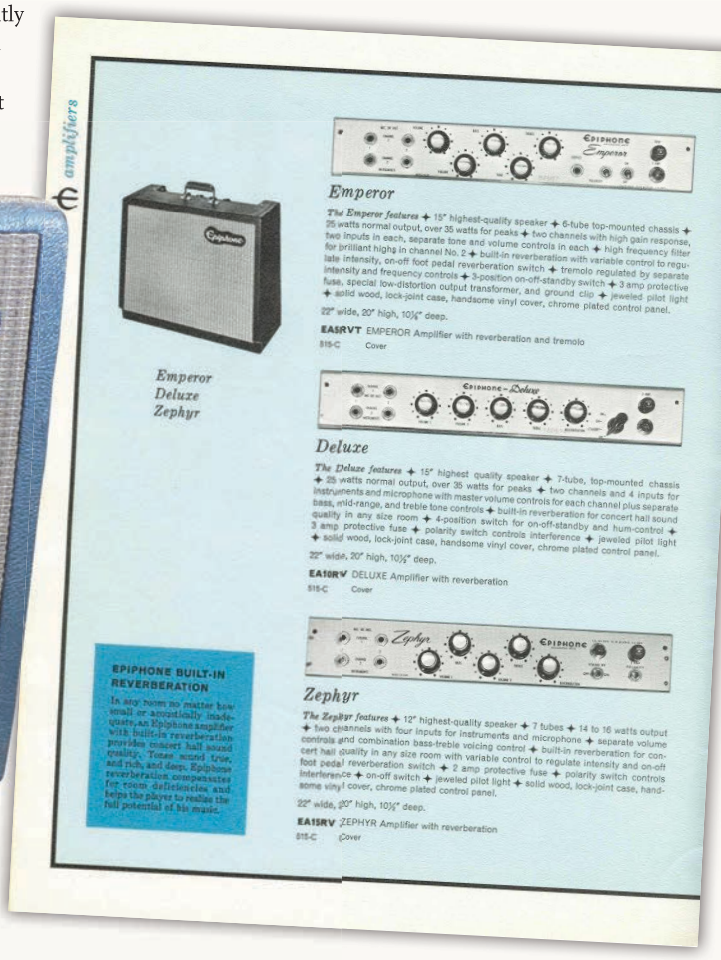
Epiphone's amp models evolved a lot over the course of more than 20 years, while retaining many of the same names. Still a dual-6L6 amp with octal preamp tubes, the Zephyr now looked marginally more akin to Fender's tweed amps of the era, and delivered closer to 30 watts through a stout 15-inch speaker.

It was still a dual-chassis amp, with an upper preamp section and a lower power chassis, but was by now very differently equipped. Dual channels had two inputs each, with individual bass and treble controls in addition to their volume controls. Knobs for speed and strength governed the vibrato (actually tremolo) effect that worked on both channels, which also had a footswitch jack for remote on/off. Given the inclusion of independent channel EQ and tremolo, this rendition of the Zephyr was more fully featured than any comparably sized Fender amp of the day. This short-lived styling exemplifies one of the last runs of pre-Gibson amps, before Epiphone's model lines more closely followed their new parent company.

1959 Epiphone Century EA-25T

After Gibson's purchase of Epiphone in 1957, the Kalamazoo company brought Epi amp manufacturing in-house. Unsurprisingly,





The Epiphone Century was introduced to the Electar line-up in 1939

The Futura – Epi's equivalent of the Fender Super Reverb

many models then paralleled several in the Gibson line-up of the late 50s and 60s, although cosmetics were at least mildly – and sometimes drastically – different.

This 1959 Epiphone Century EA-25T (there's that Epi model name again) is the electronic doppelgänger of Gibson's GA-20T, a mid-sized 1x12 combo with tremolo. Shape-wise, it may look like Fender's narrow-panel tweed cabs of the era, but like many Gibsons of the day, it featured some more unusual valve selections. In this case, the good news is that the circuit here includes some variations of the highly desirable Gibson GA-40 Les Paul Amp of the late 50s, including one fat-sounding 5879 pentode channel and the lush 6SQ7-powered tremolo, all through about 18 watts courtesy of two 6V6s. The EA-25T, and the GA-20T for that matter, generally sell for less than the more collectible and recognisably name-associated Les Paul Amp, so... win!

1964 Futura EA-12RVT

So, having made it this far through our trawl of Epi amps, we finally have a star-worthy contender to present you. Not only did American blues legend Michael Bloomfield play his Telecaster through an Epiphone Futura for a time in the mid 60s, but it's the amp he used when Dylan infamously 'went electric' at the Newport Folk Festival in 1965, and there's some indication that Mr Zimmerman plugged into a Futura himself. In fact, we might rightly have the powerful, punchy Futura to blame for Dylan's hostile reception at that erstwhile acoustic festival: while the popular story has it that the crowd booed Dylan's amplified set to an early close because of the general objection to his embrace of the electric guitar, alternative analyses declare that audience members actually grew vociferous because Bloomfield's guitar was far too loud. Perhaps it was some combination of the two – a drastic new stylistic direction for the folk hero, presented at eviscerating volume – but the Epiphone Futura was there, either way.

> Think of the Futura, then, as Epiphone's Super Reverb: a 4x10 combo with reverb and tremolo

By the mid 60s, it seemed that Gibson and Epiphone amps were bowing to Fender's role as market leader, while not quite ready to copy the Californians' designs outright. Think of the Futura, then, as Epiphone's Super Reverb: a 4x10 combo with reverb and tremolo, pumping out around 50 watts. For all of the similarities of format, the Futura was still very different internally from the famous Fender 4x10 combo. Rather than 6L6s, Epiphone used a pair of 7591 output valves (also found in many Ampegs of the era), and all preamp valves were 6EU7s other than one, which was a 12AU7.

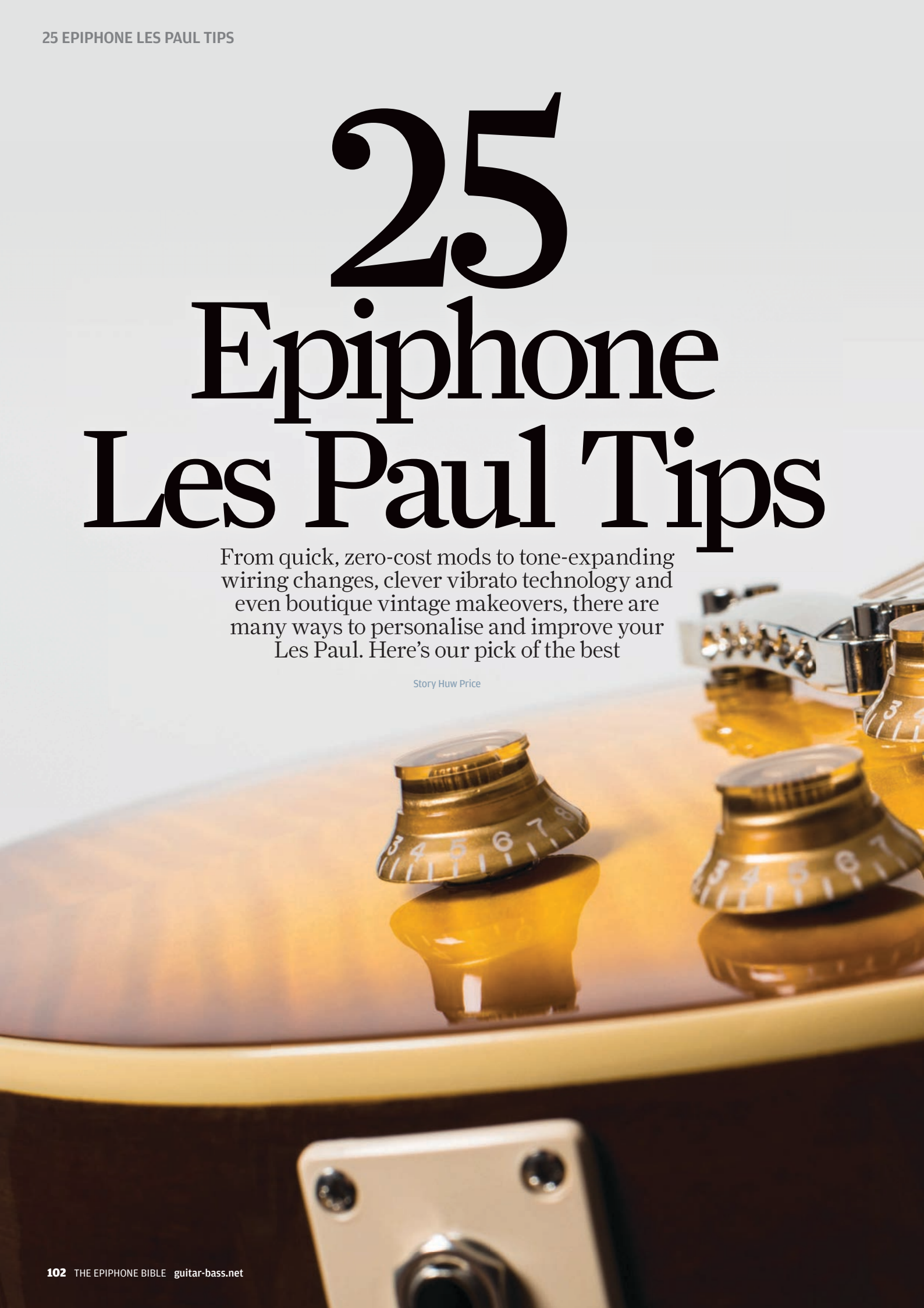
Modern alternatives

The modern-day Epiphone company, still a division of Gibson of course, continues to make the Century amp, and there are also some interesting latter-day models afloat on the used market. The five-watt, single-ended Valve Jr. has long been a popular mod platform for players seeking a crankable bedroom and studio amplifier, and can usually be had for extremely short money. Epiphone's Custom 30, available as a head or 2x12 combo, is a surprisingly fierce two-channel 30-watter, and was – for a time – the choice of one of my own favourite contemporary indie/alt-rock guitarists, Tad Kubler of The Hold Steady.

25 Epiphone Les Paul Tips

From quick, zero-cost mods to tone-expanding wiring changes, clever vibrato technology and even boutique vintage makeovers, there are many ways to personalise and improve your Les Paul. Here's our pick of the best

Story Huw Price



Even if you're disinclined to undertake woodwork or have at it with a soldering iron, there's still plenty of scope for modifying, customising and upgrading your Les Paul. Broadly speaking, the categories of our tips break down into cosmetic changes, electrical modifications and hardware upgrades.

The iconic models Gibson made during the late 1950s do not enchant all Les Paul players, but for some, they have become an obsession. Original examples are in short supply, of course, given that only 1,500 or so were made, and the market value has sky-rocketed accordingly. Unsurprisingly, an industry of parts-suppliers now serves the needs of Les Paul players wishing to create their own vintage replicas, and this is the mindset that drives most of the cosmetic changes.

The same vintage ethos drives many of the electrical modifications, too, with circuit reconfigurations, capacitor tweaks and the ubiquitous PAF replica pickups.

> Have fun with the following mods, but don't do anything irreversible that you may come to regret

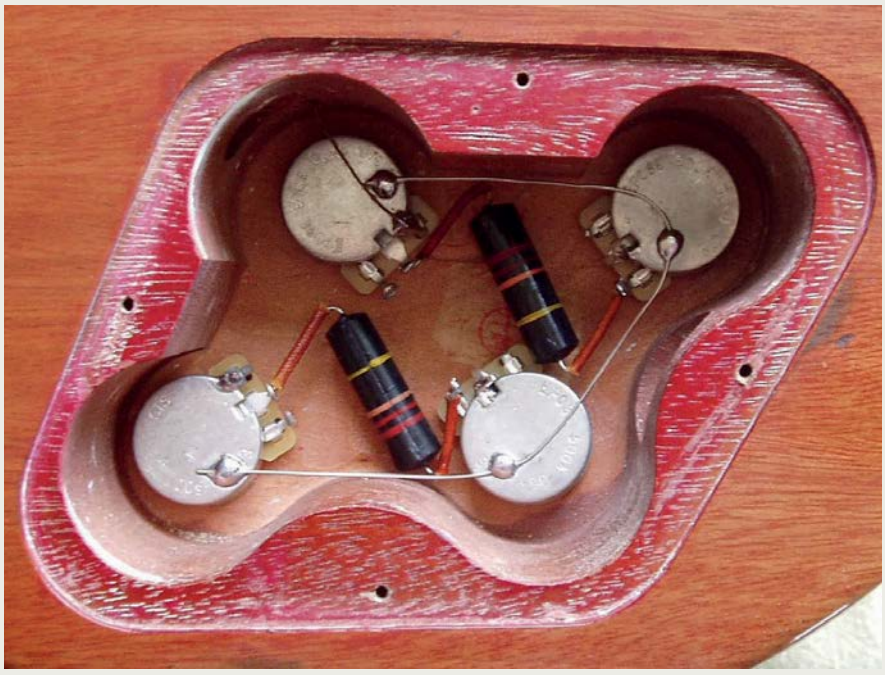
However, this is one area where Les Paul players need not be bound by 'vintage correctness'. There are easy and affordable ways to customise and expand your range of tones, and players are no longer restricted to conventional control layouts or even P-90 and PAF-style pickups.

In the past, many Les Paul players shied away from hardware upgrades because they were reluctant to drill holes in a quality guitar. Nowadays, the range of bridges, tailpieces, tremolos and tuners that will slot right in place is extensive. However, you need to be aware that hardware on USA-made Les Pauls conforms to imperial measurements, whereas Far Eastern-made models – such as Epiphones and various Japanese 'replicas' – require metric hardware.

So here are 25 of our top tips for modifying Les Pauls – or SGs, ES-335s and more besides. Some are very costly, while others are cheap, and many won't cost you a thing. Have fun, but don't do anything irreversible that you may come to regret. >

1 50s wiring

This is just about the simplest modification you can perform on your Epiphone, or indeed any guitar – and it doesn't cost a thing. They call it 50s wiring, because it's the way Les Pauls were hooked up until around 1962 or so, and the only actual difference was the connecting of the tone control to the output (ie, middle) tag of the volume control rather than the input (ie, outer) tag. With 50s wiring, you can turn down your volume control without the sound muddying up quite so much, and the volume and tone controls also become more interactive, poossibly why Gibson changed it. If you don't like it, reverse the procedure.



This picture shows the first stage of a 50s-style wiring installation. Note how the 'bumblebee' capacitors are connected to the centre tags of the volume controls

2 Tailpieces

Gibson's first stop tailpiece – the one fitted to the 50s collectors' guitars that now cost the same as a house – was originally made from aluminium, but later on, this changed to zinc, which remains stock on current models. Some players claim aluminium gives extra woodiness and more treble with a wider dynamic range, while zinc fans argue that their preferred metal has more low end and sustain. Others will tell you that they can't hear any difference whatsoever... but even so, it's a simple and reversible DIY modification. The Gibson version costs around £120, but alternatives from Faber, Pigtail, Gotoh, Kluson and others start from about £30. We believe aluminium sounds different, but even if you can't hear it, at least your Lester will be a bit lighter.

Fitting an aluminium tailpiece is a cheap and easy modification that improves the tone of a Les Paul for many players

3 Tone-cap swaps and upgrades

It is incorrect to say that tone capacitors have no effect on the sound of a guitar when the tone controls are fully up, because there is always some treble bleed when a tone circuit is installed... so the value of the capacitor will determine the frequency at which roll-off occurs. Some players say they can discern sonic differences between different types of capacitor of the same value. The originals were 0.022uF paper/oil types; repros are available, or you can use Mallory 150s, Sprague Orange Drops or Vitamin Qs. Some like to experiment with different values too for increased or decreased treble roll-off. Our best advice is to experiment!

0.022uF paper/oil capacitors – nicknamed 'bumblebees' – were installed in original Les Pauls. Replicas are available, but not all are paper/oil. Russian-made K40Y and K42Y paper-oil capacitors are readily available, cost-effective equivalents

4 Cover removal

This is one of the earliest mods players performed on their humbucker-equipped Les Pauls (Clapton's 'Beano' Burst was a classic example). It was generally thought at the time that removing the covers made the pickups sound louder. In fact, players who removed their covers were probably just hearing more treble, because the capacitive effect of the covers caused high-frequency roll-off. Vintage nickel-silver covers were very thin and kept treble loss down, while later covers, – especially thick brass ones – did the upper-frequency response no favours. The principle also applies to Tele neck pickups, which can be de-muffled by snipping the bridging wire from the cover to the negative wire.

Covers are usually held in place with two blobs of solder. Use a Stanley knife to cut through the solder, being extremely careful with your fingers and the pickup itself, then lift the cover off. Here, we see an 'uncovered' double-black Shed PAF Daddy

5 Top wrapping

In addition to providing an anchor point for the strings, the stop tailpiece ensures that the strings have a suitable break-angle over the saddles. However, when the tailpiece is screwed tight to the body, the angle might be too sharp and the strings may end up contacting the back of the bridge, which increases the chances of string breakage. One solution is to feed the strings through the tailpiece from the pickup side and then to wrap them over the top of the tailpiece. Proponents of the method claim you get the tonal benefits of tailpiece-to-body contact, coupled with more sustain and a slinkier playing feel.

This is one mod you can easily try for zero cost. Not everybody likes the result, but many players who try the 'wrap over' trick – including Bonamassa, Wylde and Gibbons – never go back

6 Nut jobs

Much is made of the type of material used for nuts. Traditionalists insist on bone; some prefer the slippery attributes of high-tech materials such as Graph Tech's TUSQ, while Lester players such as Zakk Wylde famously prefer brass. Epiphone has installed a variety of nuts depending on the model, including a Steinberger trem with locking nut in the 80s.

Even so, a nut can only affect the tone of open strings, so the main reason for installing a new nut would be if the slots are inaccurately cut, or they prove to be too deep after a re-fret. For vintage authenticity, you might consider installing a 6/6-grade nylon nut. Pre-cut nylon nuts are available, but often at a steep price. Alternatively, you can buy a sheet of 6/6 nylon and make one up.

Discussions about guitar playability often overlook the importance of a well-cut and properly slotted nut. This may be one for a professional luthier, but you can choose various materials. Here's one being made by reader Tony Berrington in correct 50s-spec nylon

7 Nylon saddles

Nylon isn't generally regarded as a tone-enhancing material, but here it is again. Les Pauls have always had metal saddles, and the originals were nickel-plated brass. Gibson's early Tune-o-matic-equipped semi-acoustics had the same, but Gibson were fitting nylon saddles on the semis by the mid 60s. Comparing a '60 ES-330 with a '64 ES-330, the '64 had a noticeably more resonant acoustic tone: a quick bridge swap showed this was due to nylon saddles. If you want a similar effect, try some nylon saddles on your Lester... or mix up metal for the wound strings with nylon for the un-wound ones, like Joe Bonamassa.

Joe Bonamassa favours nylon saddles for the plain strings on his Gibson signature model; a mod like this could easily be made to his Epiphone signatures, too

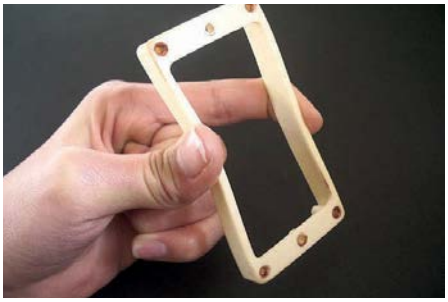
8 Alternative pickups

Due to the way that they're mounted, pickup swapping was never a big thing among Les Paul players; chopping Fenders was always an easier and less scary proposition. These days, things are simpler and all kinds of options are now available for humbucker and P-90-equipped Les Pauls. If you want an early-50s tone, there are plenty of P-90s in PAF mounts... or what about getting Gretsch-y, with an 'English mount' and P-90-sized Filter'Tron or DeArmond soundalikes from TV Jones? Alternatively, Seymour Duncan's P-Rails gives P-90, PAF and Fender-like sounds at the flick of a switch.

The Seymour Duncan P-Rails has to be the most versatile drop-in pickup replacement for Les Pauls. It combines a P-90 and a narrow single coil with a blade magnet. The coils can be used individually, or combined in series for humbucker-type tones

9 Aged plastics

Without wishing to offend anybody, getting into replica plastic parts for Les Pauls will lead you straight to the lunatic fringe of vintage repro. Obsessives often engage in heated discussions about colour, texture and even smell. Put it this way, you will know your bendy butyrate M69 rings are right when they smell of sick and they cost you a mere £200. Other über-expensive items may include single-ring tuner buttons and Italian celluloid fingerboard inlays. Then there are knobs, switch tips and poker chips to consider. Vintage Haven, Montreux, Dead Mint Club, Monster Relic, Retro Vibe and Time Machine Collection can make your vintage replica look amazing... but it will sound exactly the same.



Aged parts such as these Time Machine Collection M69 rings don't come cheap, but they look a lot better than the ones Epiphone uses

10 Tailpiece clamping

Traditional tailpiece studs do not grip stop tailpieces at all – the pull of the strings holds the tailpiece in position. Often, you'll see tailpieces tilting forward, and it's claimed better tone can be achieved by securing the tailpiece more securely. TonePros sells a range of replacement studs that comprise a stud and a separate cap that screws down onto the top of the tailpiece, while the Faber Tone-Lock kits consist of replacement studs with spacer rings of various depths, to grip your tailpiece and maintain original appearance – especially if you go for an aged set. Spacers allow you to set the tailpiece higher off the body for a looser feel.

The obvious way to keep the tailpiece fixed in position is to screw it flat to the body. Setting it higher softens the break angle, much like top-wrapping, but the tailpiece may need to be secured. TonePros Locking Studs provide an effective solution

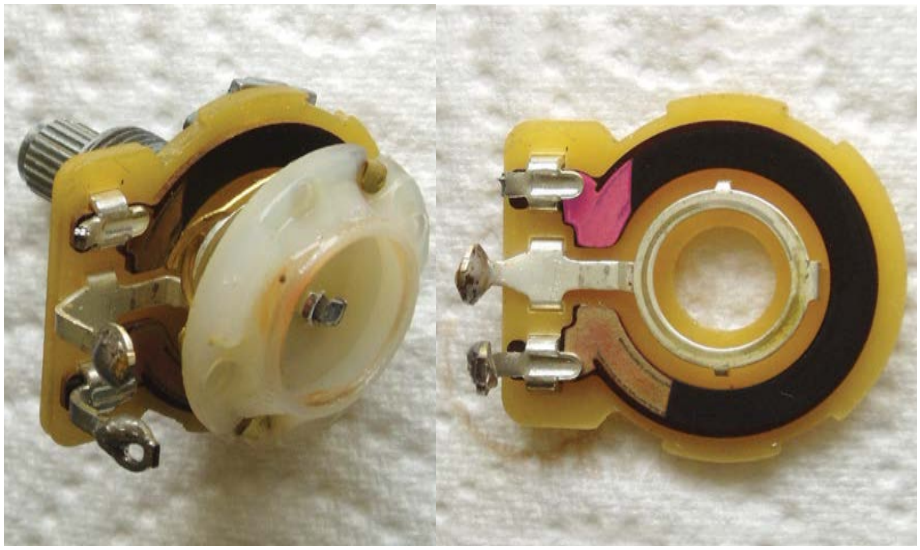
11 Tuner swap

Most of the 50s Les Pauls associated with big-name players have die cast tuners – with the exception of Billy Gibbons' Pearly Gates. Taking a Black & Decker to the headstock of a vintage LP may seem horrific nowadays, but die cast tuners require wider holes than Klusons and players were more concerned with keeping their guitars in tune than originality. Increased mass at the headstock may have enhanced sustain, too. Nowadays, however, players are equally likely to retrofit vintage-style tuners, but you'll need conversion bushes to do it. As your reward, you'll get vintage looks and livelier dynamics – and, contrary to vintage lore, decent Kluson-style tuners hold their tuning just as well as die casts.

There was a time when players removed their Klusons and fitted Grovers and Schallers for improved tuning stability. These days, the trend is the opposite, and here are a couple of Kluson-style repros from Fake58 – one with a simple 'aged' button, the other with a shrunken and shrivelled button

12 'No-load' tone pots

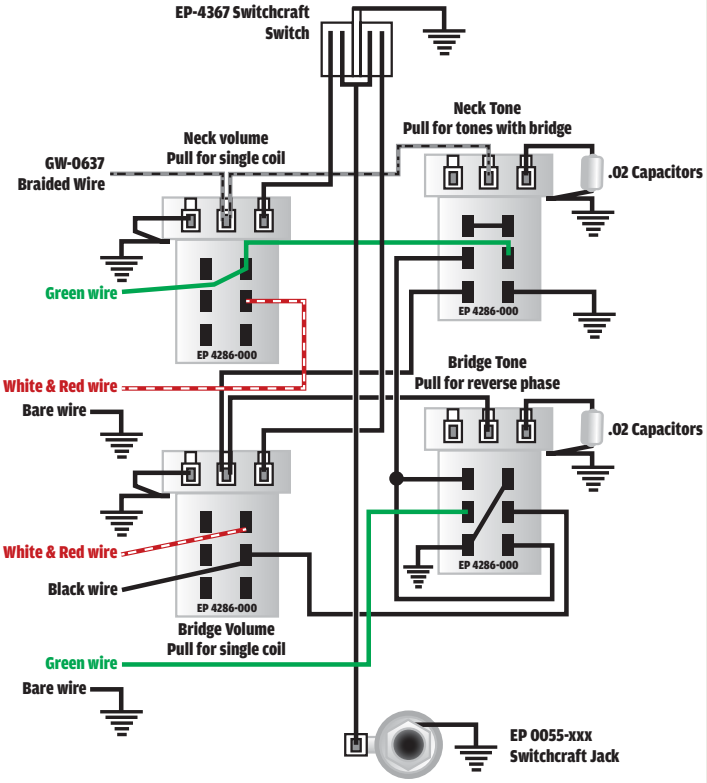
A lack of clarity and treble is a common Les Paul-related complaint, but what can you do when pickup swapping isn't an option? Whenever a guitar is fitted with tone controls, there is always some treble bleed through the tone circuit (you can test this by disconnecting the tone circuit from the volume control). Installing a 'no load' tone control potentiometer ensures that at the top of the turn, the pot clicks into a position that disconnects it from the circuit and eliminates treble bleed. Turn the pot down, and it will function as a normal tone control. Buy them or make your own; you'll notice the biggest difference in the neck position.



Installing 'no-load' potentiometers for your tone controls may help to make your Les Paul sound brighter and clearer. They're easy to buy, but it's almost as easy to make them yourself

13 Jimmy Page wiring

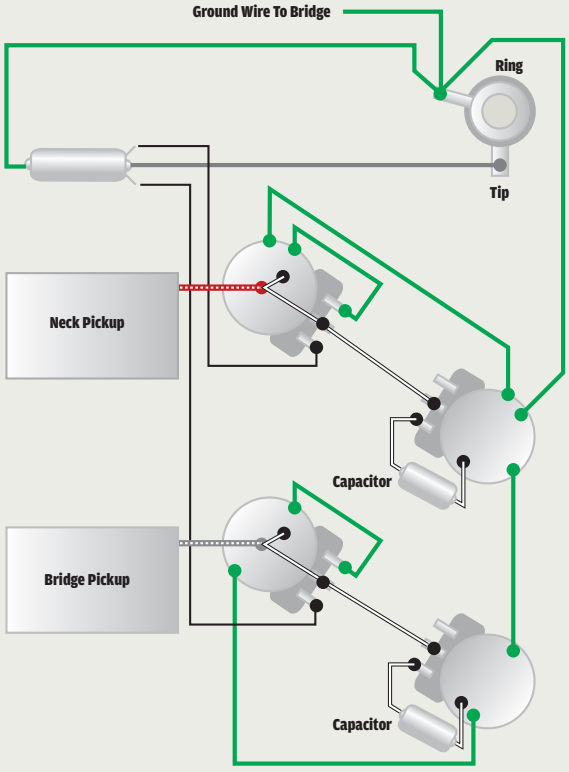
Any Les Paul with two humbuckers actually has four pickups – two pairs of single coils, with each pair wired in series. Considering the tones you can get from a regular Stratocaster, it's obvious Les Pauls have a lot of un-tapped potential. Jimmy Page thought so: he had four push/pull switches fitted in his 1960 Les Paul. The push/pulls under the volume controls switch between regular humbucker and single-coil tones. The push/pull under the neck tone is a series/parallel switch, and the one under the bridge tone switches the pickups in and out of phase for Peter Green-style tones. If your pickups have vintage-style braided wires, they need replacing with multicore wires.



Jimmy Page used a lot of trick-wiring with his vintage Les Pauls for out-of-phase and single-coil tones. A definitive schematic has yet to emerge, but here's one that will effectively do the job

14 No-cut-out mod

The regular Les Paul wiring scheme means that the controls are somewhat interactive. One of the oddities is the way that turning down one of the volume controls kills both pickups when the pickup selector is in the middle setting. Some players like it for the stuttering staccato trick where you hit a powerchord and 'play' it with the switch, but it drives other players bananas. Fortunately, it's easy to de-couple the volume controls by wiring the volume controls backwards; just follow the diagram. The downside of the mod is more noticeable treble loss when you turn down the volume controls, so treble-bleed caps may be needed. Try 330pF for starters.



If you'd like your volume controls to be completely independent and eliminate the cutout in the middle position, it's a simple case of reversing the input and output connections on the volume potentiometers

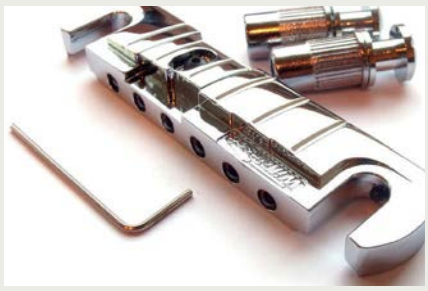
15 No-hole Bigsby installation

Filled holes in the tops of vintage Les Pauls are the evidence of long-removed Bigsby vibratos. To some, a Les Paul with a Bigsby looks just as incongruous as a Gretsch without one. Nevertheless, we think Lesters look the nuts with a Bigsby – and you can now install Bigsbys on Les Pauls without drilling any holes at all, thanks to a company called Vibramate. A specially designed bracket attaches in place of the stop tailpiece to secure the front of the Bigsby unit, and the strap-button screw clamps it at the back. This do-it-yourself installation can be done within minutes, but you'll need a fresh set of strings, too (www.vibramate.com).

The Vibramate system allows you to fix a Bigsby onto your Les Paul without drilling any holes, because it utilises the tailpiece studs and the strap screw to hold the vibrato in place

16 Bridge replacement

Early-50s-style Les Pauls and Les Paul Juniors had wrap-over tailpieces, so intonation can be compromised. Fortunately, wrap-over replacement bridges with adjustable intonation are readily available. Vintage fans generally prefer ABR-1-style aluminium Tune-o-matic bridges with brass saddles to the later all-zinc Nashville bridges. They can be swapped, but they require thumbwheel posts with a different diameter. Browns Guitars and Faber offer the necessary conversion posts. For replacement wrap-over bridges and ABR-1 replicas, try Wilkinson, Pigtail, Badass, Hipshot, Schaller, Gotoh, TonePros, Callaham and Gibson, too.



Trevor Wilkinson's take on the wrap-over tailpiece is sleek and elegant. It has a movable saddle for the B and G that gives you a much better chance of achieving accurate intonation

17 Multi-position switch

Installing extra switches in Fenders was never a cause for concern, because if you changed your mind, you could always buy a new pickguard to replace the one you'd perforated. Most Les Paul owners have baulked at the idea of drilling holes in their guitars, so the options for extra-pickup configurations have largely been confined to push/pull and push/push switches. Which is why the recent introduction of a six-way toggle switch that fits in place of the regular three-way is an exciting development. The Free-Way Switch provides Lester players with countless options. Jimmy Page had one installed in the Les Paul Custom he used for the Ahmet Ertegun Tribute Concert, and they're manufactured here in the UK.

The Free-Way 6-position Toggle Switch was recently introduced by NSF Controls. It means you can add all kinds of options to your guitar without altering its appearance, or making the controls too fiddly

18 Adding vibrato

Key to the initial success of Paul Reed Smith has to be his hybridisation of the Les Paul and the Stratocaster, combining Les Paul tones and vibe with Strat ergonomics and a vintage-style trem that actually stayed in tune. The timing was perfect for a generation grown weary of day-glo 'Superstrats'. Fortunately, there are now several types of vibrato that can be fitted to Les Pauls without any necessity to drill extra holes or make irreversible alterations. The Schaller 'Tremolo Les Paul' is considerably less intrusive than the Floyd Rose FRX, but the market leader seems to be the Stetsbar Stop Tail.

Let's face it, nobody in their right mind would rout huge holes in the body of a Les Paul to mount a Strat-style vibrato, and Bigsbys aren't for everybody. The Stetsbar has long been the option for players who want to mount a proper whammy bar on a Les Paul

19 Metal jack-plate upgrade

If a pickup fails or you break a string, you will be able to keep playing – but if your guitar output fails, you'll find that a Les Paul is not an ideal choice for an 'unplugged' performance. Every guitar design has its weak spots and the jack plate is the Les Paul's, because the slim plastic plate is all too easy to snap. The solution is simple – a metal replacement. This is a cheap and reversible modification, but try to ensure the screwholes of the new plate will line up with the old one before you hit 'Buy It Now'.

The only tools required are a crosshead screwdriver and something to tighten up the jack nut. If you want to keep the original look, simply install the plastic plate on top of the metal one.

If you wish to buy a metal jack plate, be sure to double-check that the screwholes will line up with those of the original. If in doubt, contact the retailer for more information

20 Magnet swap

Various magnets are used in pickups, and they all sound different. The most common magnetic alloy is Alnico, and P-90s and humbuckers usually have alnico II, III, IV or V. Powerful ceramic magnets are also popular with rock players, who prefer high output with plenty of brightness. If you want softer vintage tones, extra brightness or higher output and more aggression, it's cheaper to swap magnets than swap pickups. Humbuckers have one magnet and P-90s have two, so remove the cover (if necessary), loosen the backplate and slide them out.

Pickup makers are reluctant to sell you magnets, but alternatives are available from Stewart-MacDonald and Sensmag, Inc. Here's a rough-cast A4 magnet being slid into a Shed PAF Daddy

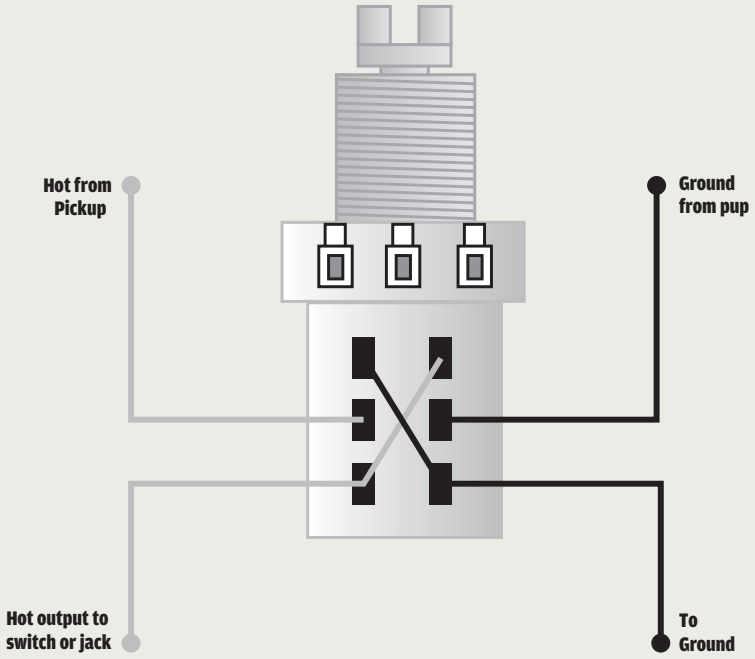
21 Setting the pickup height

Humbuckers have screws at both ends to enable you to adjust the height of the pickups. Similarly, soapbar P-90s have two small screws passing through the covers, which do the same job. The proximity of pickup coils to the strings has a massive effect. Setting the pickups very high can make them sound overly aggressive and midrange-y (the magnetic pull may even reduce sustain). When pickups are set lower, the tone can be sweeter and more open, but they can sound dull and unresponsive if set too low. To optimise your tone, the only tools you need are a screwdriver and your ears. Make sure you take time to experiment before buying a new set of pickups.

Pickup height is a vital ingredient of the fine art of setting up a guitar. Many players don't realise the huge effect it can often have, and go chasing the latest, hippest pickups without first making the most of the ones they've got

22 The Peter Green mod

During his time with Fleetwood Mac, Peter Green's Les Paul had a very distinctive sound in the middle position, because the two pickups were out of phase. There are two ways you can replicate this. After removing the cover of one pickup (we'd suggest the neck), slacken off the baseplate, slide out the magnet, then flip it around (not over) to reverse the magnetic polarity relative to the coil. Tighten the baseplate up, refit your cover if you use one, and you're done. Alternatively, you can flip the phase electronically, by reversing the hot and cold connections. This can be either hard-wired, or switchable.



If you don't want to remove the cover from your pickup, you can reverse its polarity electronically instead. This can be done permanently, or it can be linked to a switch to give you the option

23 Plastic surgery

If you want to go the whole hog and make your Epi Les Paul over so it's as close to a 50s Gibson original as possible, you might consider replacing the plastics – the pickguard, knobs, pickup rings, 'poker chip' toggle switch surround, etc – with vintage-accurate, aged replica parts. Yes, it involves descending to dangerous depths in the great rabbit hole of guitar nerdism and can be eye-wateringly expensive, but when an original Burst costs as much as a house? Fugeddaboudit. Visit www.crazyparts.de and www.dmc-parts.com but be warned, butyrate addiction is a slippery slope and it won't help you attract the right kind of groupies at gigs.

This Dead Mint Club M69 pickup ring, pictured next to a vintage original, is a pretty damn close replica of the original 1950s Gibson part. Will it make your Epiphone Les Paul sound better? No, but some vintage obsessives lose sleep over the accuracy of their plastics

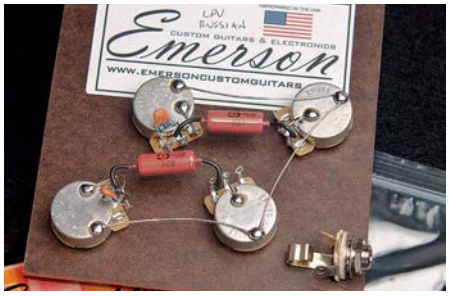
24 PAF replicas

The majority of upgrades are inspired by late-1950s models, and success is largely dependent on the pickups. Yet PAFs seem to be the hardest pickups to get 'right'. Certain key ingredients are well understood, such as plain-enamel magnet wire, butyrate bobbins, maple spacers and 2.5-inch magnets. Leaving the coils unpotted is vital, too, but the real voodoo involves correct winding tension, and knowing how much to offset the coils. Some PAF replicas are very close, but be warned: the truly authentic tone of PAFs doesn't always conform to expectations.

By and large, replica-PAF builders have proved more adept at recreating the look than the tone... but, even so, there are a select few that have managed to nail both. Here's a real 50s PAF with that iconic decal

25 Pot swap

The value of volume pots does have an effect on the sound of guitars. As a rule of thumb, lower-value pots equate to reduced treble (Fender uses 250K pots to sweeten up single coils). 500K was always the stock value for volume and tone controls in Les Pauls, but many are fitted with 300K volume pots and some have 100K tone pots. If your LP sounds too dull and dark, measure the volume pots and install 500K replacements if 300Ks are fitted. Conversely, 300K pots will help to smooth out over-bright trebles. Some players find balance with a 500K pot for the neck and 300K for the bridge. CTS pots cost around £5, so experiment away!



You can buy control pots from suppliers such as Allparts UK, but make sure the shafts are long enough for an archtop Les Paul. Alternatively, check out pre-wired control assemblies from companies such as Emerson Custom Guitars

STAR GUITAR
MATT HEAFY

Jake Owens

Trivium's Matt Heafy sporting his Epiphone Limited Edition Les Paul Custom 6-string, with EMG 81 and 85 pickups, SlimTaper D-shaped neck, Axcess heel and LockTone bridge

	WILSHIRE SB432	OLYMPIC DOUBLE SB720	EMBASSY SB720D	OLYMPIC SB722	OLYMPIC SPECIAL SB721	ELECTRIC BASS* NEWPORT EB5	ELECTRIC BASS* EMBASSY DELUXE EBDL†
	12⅝ x 19⅝ x 1¾ Double 24½"	12⅝ x 19⅝ x 1¾ Double 24½"	12⅝ x 19⅝ x 1¾ Double 24½"	12⅝ x 19⅝ x 1¾ Double 24½"	12⅝ x 19⅝ x 1¾ Double 24½"	13 x 17 x 1⅝ Double 30½"	13 x 17 x 1⅝ Double 34"
	22 22nd 2	22 22nd 1	22 22nd 1	22 22nd 2	22 22nd 1	20 18th 1	20 18th 2
	2 2 Yes	1 1 No	1 1 No	2 2 Yes	1 1 No	1 1 No	2 1 No
	Tune-o-matic Bar Mahogany	Metal Offset Maestro Vibrola Mahogany	Metal Offset Combination Mahogany	Metal Offset Combination Mahogany	Metal Offset Combination Mahogany	Metal Bar Combination Mahogany	Tune-O-Matic Bar Mahogany
	Rosewood Dot Enclosed Metal Nickel	Rosewood Dot Enclosed Plastic Nickel	Rosewood Dot Enclosed Plastic Nickel	Rosewood Dot Enclosed Plastic Nickel	Rosewood Dot Plastic Nickel	Rosewood Dot Metal Cello Type Nickel	Rosewood Dot Metal Bass Type Nickel

also makes complete line of bass viols—illustrated in separate folder

† Mute built-in

CUSTOM COLORS

Custom colors are available on Epiphone solid body instruments at extra cost.

California Coral

Sunset Yellow

Pacific Blue

The Artist

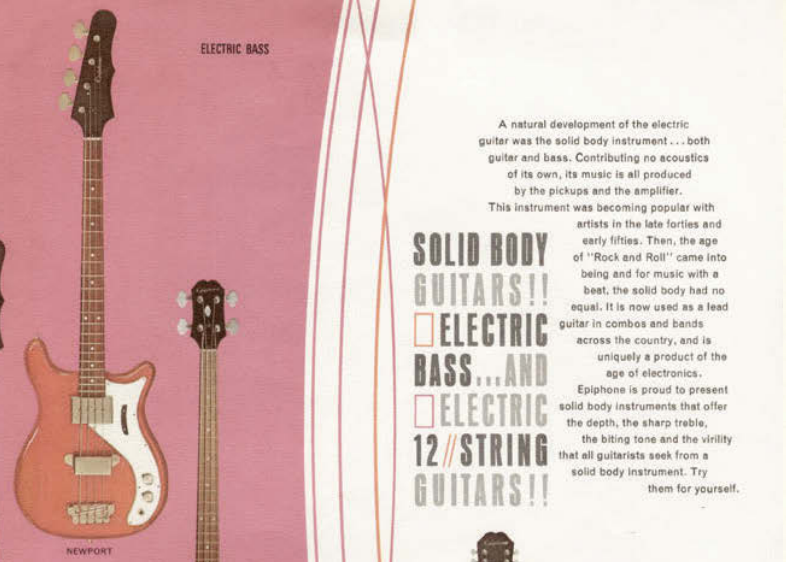
The superb Epiphone Artist is for the exacting player who requires the very finest instrument for orchestra or concert work. Of the most choice woods, it has a straight-grained spruce arched top, select curly maple full arched back and sides, finest maple neck, natural Brazilian rosewood fingerboard, and rock maple tailpiece. Superb arching allows for greatest resonance. Hand-polishing brings out the beautiful flame of the wood. Hand-inlaid triple purfling ornaments top and back. Gold-plated, full plate engraved machine heads. Adjustable end pin. Famous George Van Eps adjustable bridge, sloping shoulders, narrow fingerboard. Three-quarter size.

B5N THE ARTIST, natural finish
B5S THE ARTIST, shaded finish

EPIPHONE basses

Choice of the most accomplished artists and of students alike, Epiphone basses enjoy a world-wide reputation for extraordinary richness of tone and playing ease—a tribute to their unsurpassed design and construction. Traditionally finest for concert and orchestra and for classroom instruction, they bring out the musical best in the player. Epiphone basses are the work of the most skilled stringed instrument makers, using the finest materials . . . selected spruce and maple with beautiful flame and finish, rosewood for fingerboards. Super arching and shaping allow the greatest resonance and fullness of tone. Multi-ply construction assures lifetime service.

ELECTRIC BASS



A natural development of the electric guitar was the solid body instrument . . . both guitar and bass. Contributing no acoustics of its own, its music is all produced by the pickups and the amplifier. This instrument was becoming popular with artists in the late forties and early fifties. Then, the age of "Rock and Roll" came into being and for music with a beat, the solid body had no equal. It is now used as a lead guitar in combos and bands across the country, and is uniquely a product of the age of electronics. Epiphone is proud to present solid body instruments that offer the depth, the sharp treble, the biting tone and the virility that all guitarists seek from a solid body instrument. Try them for yourself.

SOLID BODY GUITARS!!
ELECTRIC BASS...AND
ELECTRIC 12 STRING GUITARS!!

12 STRING

12 STRING	RIVIERA-12	WILSHIRE-12
	E2612	SB432-12
	16 x 19 x 1¾ Double 24½"	12⅝ x 19⅝ x 1¾ Double 24½"
	22 19th 2	22 22nd 2
	2 2 Yes	2 2 Yes
	Tune-O-Matic Bar Type	Tune-O-Matic Bar Type
	Rosewood Pearloid	Dot Pearloid
	Nickel	Nickel

custom colors are available on Epiphone solid body instruments at extra cost

SUNSET YELLOW

CALIFORNIA CORAL

PACIFIC BLUE

EPIPHONE

Epiphone Basses are a true result of Epiphone's 79 year old tradition of producing fine instruments worthy of the most exacting artists. They are designed and produced by the most skilled instrument makers. Their multi-ply construction insures a lifetime of dependable service. Soundposts are precisely set, bridges are professionally adjusted, and each instrument is proved by actual playing before it leaves the Epiphone factory.

MODEL B-4—A truly fine bass in every detail. Made of high-quality selected woods . . . straight grained spruce top; maple neck, back and sides; natural Brazilian rosewood fingerboard; and rock maple tailpiece. Arched top and back for maximum tone. Black and white purfling (genuine inlays) on top and back. Polished Brass , full plate machine heads. Highly polished in choice of two finishes. Three-quarter size only.

B4-S—Shaded Finish. Each..... **$310**
B4-B—Blonde Finish. Each..... **340**

Sweet And Lowdown

Epiphone's bass line has been providing basslines since before the war – they were an instrumental factor in Gibson's decision to buy the company. **RICK BATEY** takes us on an Epi-flavoured low-end odyssey

Epiphone is famous for guitars, but basses are far from a side-note in the company's history – they've been woven into its story for the last 75 years. Some 60 years ago, basses played a vital walk-on part in the crucial time of the Gibson buyout; they remained part of the line through the cool 60s and into the 70s and 80s, and today, basses play a more important role in the Epiphone portfolio than ever, offering everything from practical, affordable vintage reissues to modern all-rounders, to interesting, and some may say even quite brave, signature models.

But let's go back to 1941, when Epiphone announced a brand-new family of five upright basses, from the $105 B-1 to the $205 B-5, all with laminated construction, and all in the most popular 'three-quarter' size. After the war, as the Epiphone guitar line dipped inexorably in quality, the basses stood firm, and in the mid 50s (at a time when the top-of-the-line B-5 cost $375), they were still highly respected on bandstands across America. They were often preferred among players to the better-known brands, such as Kay, King and American Standard.

Low-end theory

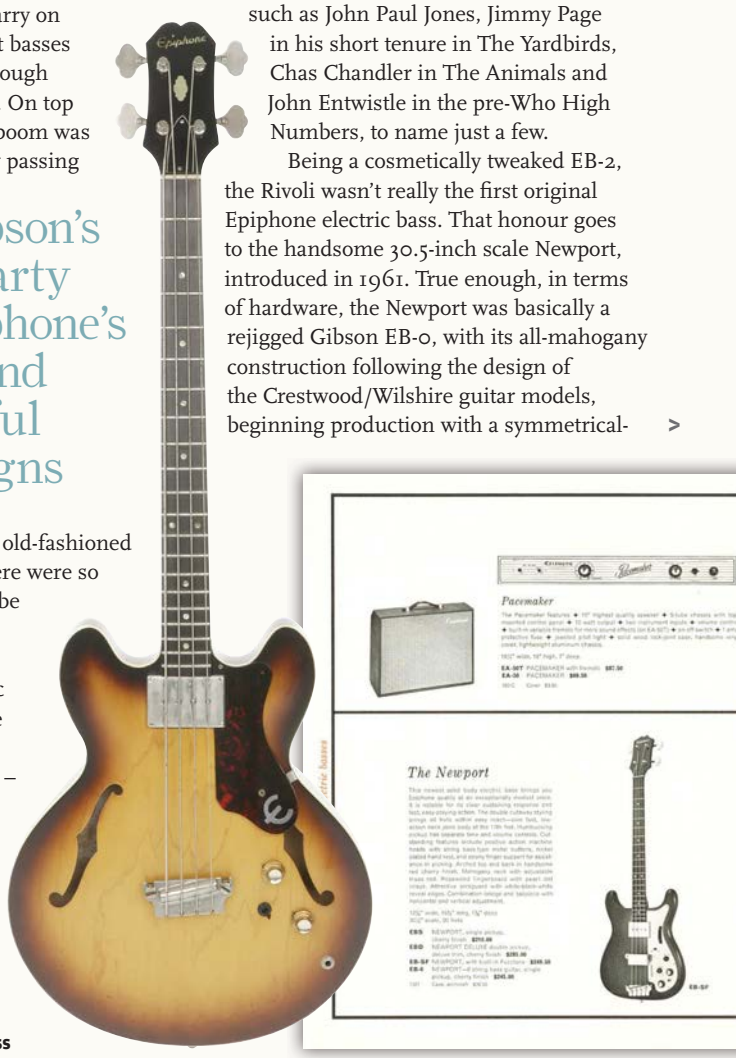
No wonder, then, that Gibson – which had launched an upright bass line itself in 1938, but had never resumed its production after the war – saw an opportunity. By 1957, Epiphone was for sale: Gibson's new Vice President, Ted McCarty, encouraged by long-time Epiphone fan Les Paul, wanted those stylish and successful bass designs for his company. And for $20,000, that's what he got... although the moulds and jigs turned out to be not quite as complete as was hoped.

Ironically, the items that Gibson received on the side of the deal – the brand name, the guitar parts, the chance to launch a whole new range – would prove far, far more valuable than those bass blueprints and tools, for although Gibson did carry on building Epiphone upright basses until 1963, it struggled through many production troubles. On top of that, the electric-guitar boom was gaining velocity with every passing day. Why struggle making old-fashioned doghouse basses when there were so many electrics begging to be built and sold?

> In 1957, Gibson's Ted McCarty wanted Epiphone's stylish and successful bass designs

In 1959, to create the first-ever Epiphone electric bass guitar, Gibson did the simplest thing possible: it took the Gibson EB-2 bass – launched in the spring of '58, basically an ES-335 body with a 30.5-inch scale four-string neck and a huge pickup – and rebadged it as the Epiphone Rivoli. The Rivoli closely shadowed the EB-2 in terms of spec changes and would run (as would the later two-pickup Rivoli II variant) until 1970, gaining an impressive following, especially amongst British players such as John Paul Jones, Jimmy Page in his short tenure in The Yardbirds, Chas Chandler in The Animals and John Entwistle in the pre-Who High Numbers, to name just a few.

Being a cosmetically tweaked EB-2, the Rivoli wasn't really the first original Epiphone electric bass. That honour goes to the handsome 30.5-inch scale Newport, introduced in 1961. True enough, in terms of hardware, the Newport was basically a rejigged Gibson EB-0, with its all-mahogany construction following the design of the Crestwood/Wilshire guitar models, beginning production with a symmetrical- >



The EB-2-esque Rivoli was the first-ever Epiphone electric bass

horned look, with a small pickguard and topped off with a two-tuners-per-side headstock, later changing to asymmetrical body horns, a larger pickguard with a sweeping tail that carried the control knobs, and a single-sided 'batwing' headstock.

Marshall Grant of Johnny Cash's backing duo the Tennessee Two was a well-known Newport adopter – there's some great footage of him with his bass at the San Quentin concerts on YouTube – and in later years, Colin Moulding of XTC made fabulous use of a Newport bass, though his was modded with an added DiMarzio near the bridge.

As well as the standard Newport EBS, there were some sister models: the EBD with two pickups and Deluxe trim, the EB-6 six-string version, and the rare and impossibly cool EB-SF of '62 to '65 with built-in fuzztone. Some have speculated that the EB-SF may have debuted just before the standalone Gibson Maestro FZ-1 fuzz pedal (Gibson's own fuzzy bass, the EB-0F, only shows up in the '63 catalogue). Could the world's first-ever fuzz effect have been designed not for guitar at all, but specifically for bass... and an Epiphone bass, at that? It's a tantalising possibility and one that would take some serious guitarchaeology to solve.

There was one more Epiphone bass of note in the 60s – the Embassy Deluxe of '63 to '69, essentially a full 34-inch scale version of the Newport, which took its hardware cues from Gibson's equivalent model, the original reverse-bodied Thunderbird. John Entwistle and Cheap Trick's Tom Petersson were both vintage Epiphone Embassy owners.

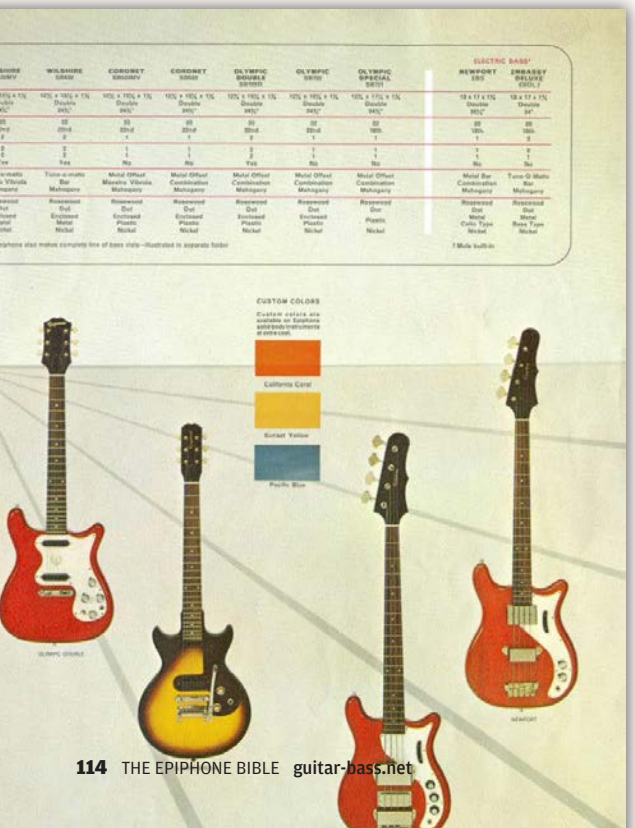
If the 60s had been promising for Epiphone instruments, then the 70s would be disappointing. Gibson cancelled all US Epiphone production in 1969 and started bringing in Matsumoku-made instruments from Japan instead, and not even original designs – often, Epiphone models of the 70s were available from other importers under other brand names... Commodore, for instance, or Vox.

A 1970s ad for Epiphone's Genesis. The decade saw Epiphone's bass line diversify, without great success

The classic Rivoli vanished; in its place came the EA-260, a bolt-on neck semi-acoustic perhaps closer in character to a Fender Coronado bass than a Gibson EB-2. The EA-260 was joined in 1972 by the solidbody 30-inch-scale ET-280, which looked like a two-pickup Fender-type bolt-on bass left over from the late 60s. Slightly better news came in 1975 with the 34-inch-scale ET-285, which at least did look a bit like a genuine 60s Newport, and came in two versions – a bolt-on in sunburst/rosewood and the 'N' version, which had an all-maple through-neck with a maple fingerboard.

> Gibson cancelled all US Epiphone production in 1969 in favour of Matsumoku-made instruments

All these were gone by 1979, and things suddenly got weirder – with two basses which are rarely remembered today, the Genesis and the Scroll. The Genesis, made in Taiwan, had tiny, truncated body horns, a short scale, and two pickups; the guitar version was reissued in 2012, but not the bass. The bolt-on short-scale Scroll went the other way, with wild, ornate body horns that made it look rather like a cross between an Ampeg and an Ibanez Black Eagle. It was a better-balanced design than the guitar version, yet neither has been reissued.



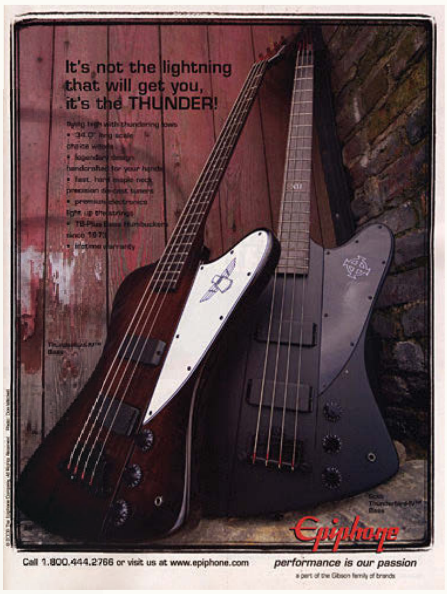
Right: The Epiphone Embassy – no prizes for guessing which decade this was released in...

The 1980s found Epiphone basses losing their identity further and hovering in a kind of holding pattern in term of design. This was the decade that saw the first high-quality Epiphone guitar reissues, with such models as the Casino and Sheraton being copied by the Matsumoku plant with real attention to detail, but basses weren't yet part of this picture; instead, Gibson used the Epiphone brand to attempt to chip away at the all-round bass market by adopting a strong Fender influence.

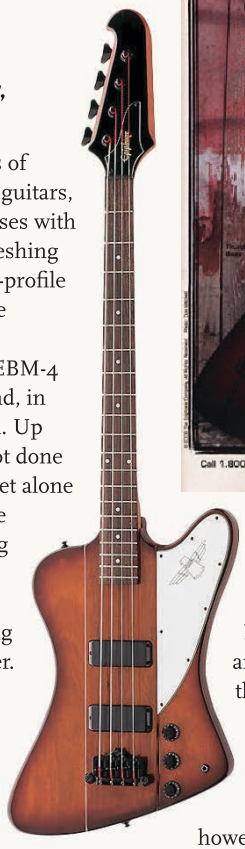
The Embassy I and II – basically P-type bolt-on basses with 60s batwing headstocks and hefty retro three-point bridges – kept the name afloat from 1982 until 1985. That range was then expanded and renamed: the none-too-subtly named Accu Bass aped the split-coil Precision format once again, and had various headstocks across its lifetime, from pointy to Explorer to batwing; the Rock Bass was essentially a Jazz Bass with a pointy headstock; and the Power Bass took a more contemporary approach, with rear-loaded controls and a P/J pickup layout.

Thrilling they may not have been, but the trio stayed in the catalogue a long, long time. The Accu ran from 1986 until 2002, the Rock Bass from '86 to '99, and the Power Bass from '86 to '95. The Accu bass would also be issued under the 'Epi' brand budget range, made in China and lasting from 1995 until 2001.

The dawn of the 1990s found Gibson making a braver attempt at the low-register via the Epiphone brand with the EBM models. Bass sisters to the EM-Series guitars,



The Viola replaced Epiphone's violin-style EB-1


Right: The Epiphone Thunderbird-IV, based on the 1963 original

themselves affordable versions of Gibson's M-II, III and IV rock guitars, these were proper modern basses with a 34-inch scale, 24 frets, a refreshing swept-horn body design, a low-profile heel, reverse Thunderbird-style headstocks and P/J pickups.

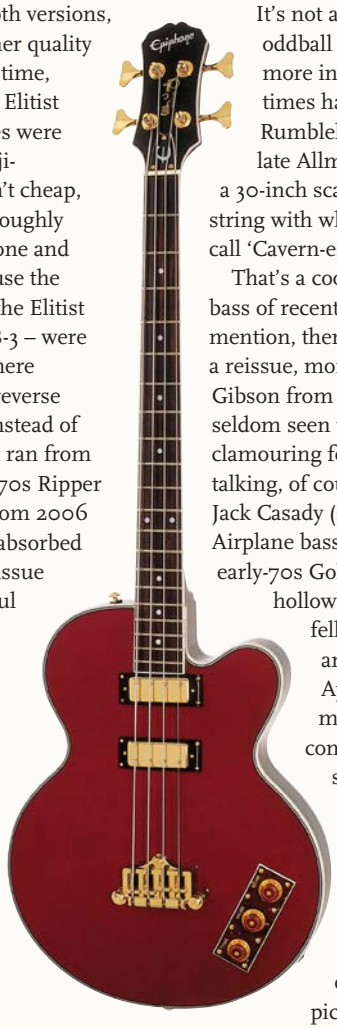
Significantly, as well as the EBM-4 Epiphone offered an EBM-5 and, in 1996 only, an Expert-6 version. Up until this point, Gibson had not done much with five-string basses, let alone six-strings; by now, though, the company was perhaps realising the Epiphone stable could be a useful home for designs that were a little too forward-looking for the traditional Gibson buyer.

Thunderbirds are go

The EBM-4 and EBM-5 did well and lasted until the end of the 1990s. After that, the 'contemporary' slot in the catalogue was taken up by another line bearing the Embassy name once again – the passive P-style Special and the active, twin-pickup Standard-IV, Standard-IV Plus and Standard-V models. These days, it's a role taken by the Toby line, the Epiphone/Tobias link-up, with both IV and V versions.

Back in 1993, Epiphone decided the time was finally right to reissue the Rivoli in a six-year run from Korean sources. The retro revival was now moving into full swing, and what had been seen as one of Gibson's (and Epiphone's) historical drawbacks – the 60s concentration upon short-scale basses – could now be turned into an advantage. 1998 saw an Epiphone reissue of the original Gibson 'violin' bass, the EB-1 (it didn't last long, athough a more Hofner-flavoured offering, the Viola, now seems to be cemented in place in the catalogue). Soon, Epiphone copies of the Gibson EB-0 and EB-3 were selling in quantities that would have seemed unimaginable in the 1980s, and they're still a much-loved budget short-scale choice today.

One hugely popular Epiphone bass of recent times has been the Thunderbird, brought back in 1999 and still rocking hard today in its bolt-on Thunderbird-IV and neck-thru Pro-IV and Pro-V forms. There have also been assorted Nikki Sixx and moody Goth versions, and for those seeking higher quality there was also, for a short time, the 'Elitist' Thunderbird. Elitist series guitars and basses were made by Terada and Fuji-Gen in Japan; they weren't cheap, however, and the price-point roughly halfway between regular Epiphone and regular Gibson seemed to confuse the market. After a three-year run, the Elitist Thunderbird – and an Elitist EB-3 – were finally discontinued in 2005. There was also also a short-lived non-reverse T-Bird, sadly with P/J pickups instead of something more vintage, which ran from '95 to '98, plus a reissue of the 70s Ripper from 1998 to 2001 and again from 2006 to 2008, but the Ripper was re-absorbed back into the Gibson line for reissue in 2009. Single-cutaway Les Paul basses might not be the most ergonomic designs on the planet, but they've been steady sellers for Epiphone for the whole of this century. Strangely, though, since the late 70s, we have never seen a reissue of the Newport, despite plenty of well-received re-runs of the Wilshire guitar... nor has there ever been a hint that the original long-scale 60s Embassy might make a comeback.



It's not as if Epiphone is afraid of the oddball designs, however; one of the more interesting models of recent times has been the Allen Woody Rumblekat, a tribute model for the late Allman Bros/Gov't Mule bassist, a 30-inch scale, chambered-body four-string with what McCartney fans might call 'Cavern-esque' pickup spacing.

That's a cool bass, but if any Epiphone bass of recent times deserves extra-special mention, then there's only one contender: a reissue, more or less, of a very obscure Gibson from the 1970s – a bass so seldom seen that literally nobody was clamouring for its reintroduction. We're talking, of course, about the Epiphone Jack Casady (see p44). The Jefferson Airplane bassist ran across the oddball early-70s Goldtop Les Paul Signature hollowbody in the mid-80s and fell in love with its cool looks and warm thumpy sound. Approaching Gibson about making them again, the company sent him to Epiphone, saying, in Jack's words, it was "a bit too much of an odd duck" for them.

But perhaps Gibson missed a trick: Casady is a true enthusiast, and even went as far as completely redesigning the pickup and electronics with Gibson design guru JT Riboloff. What they ended up with was that most elusive of basses – a proper long-scale bass with one passive pickup and plenty of character and tonal variety; an all-rounder without being a copy of Fender's excellent but all-too-common instrument that begins with the letter 'P'. In fact, the Jack Casady is a great example of what Epiphone, when given the chance, proves it can do so well: provide stylish, well-built, affordable, good-sounding basses that have something just a little bit different.

The innovative Epiphone Toby IV

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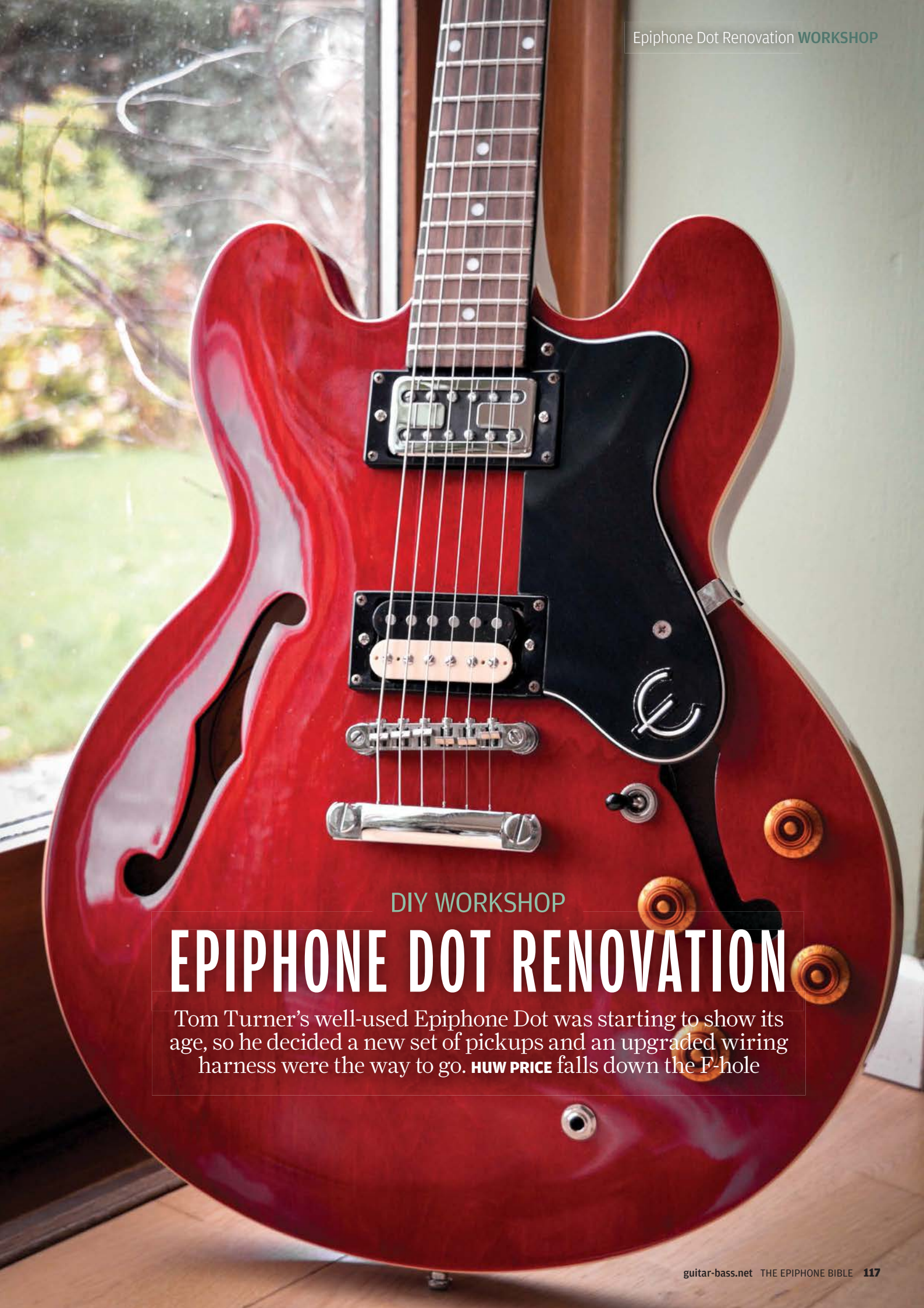
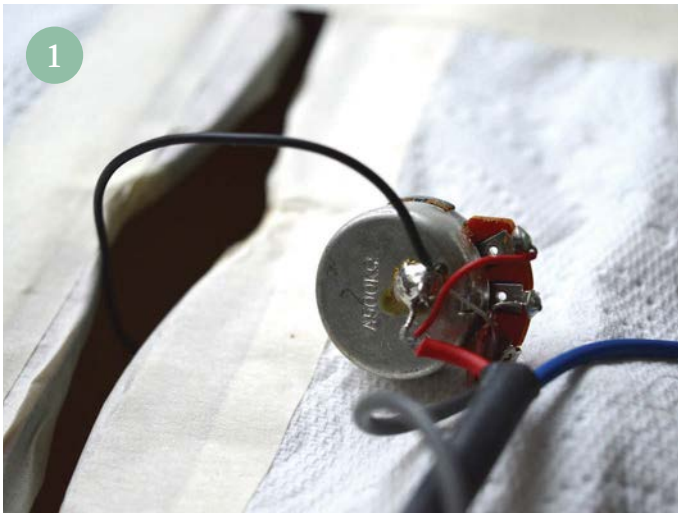
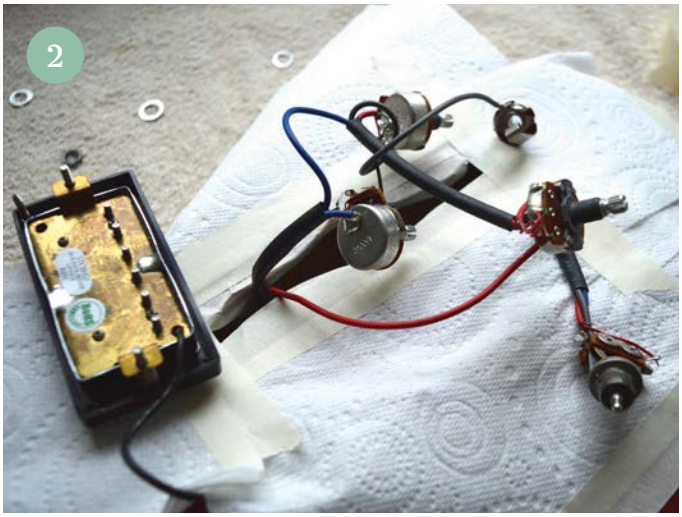


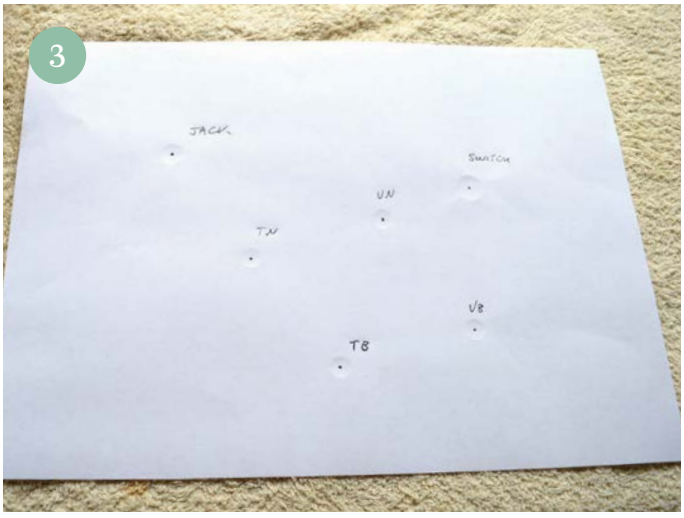
DIY WORKSHOP

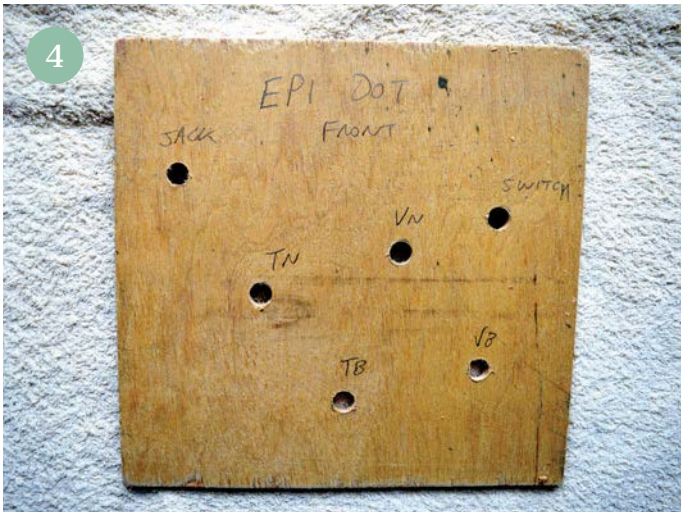
EPIPHONE DOT RENOVATION

Tom Turner's well-used Epiphone Dot was starting to show its age, so he decided a new set of pickups and an upgraded wiring harness were the way to go. **HUW PRICE** falls down the F-hole









1 The ground wire was originally soldered to the casing of the bridge volume pot. It's important to keep the ground wire safe and remember to reconnect it to a ground point on the new wiring harness

2 Here's the original wiring harness after it had been extracted through the F-hole. Once the pickup wires and ground wire are disconnected, it can be removed completely

3 Placing a sheet of paper over the holes and pressing each hole with your finger will mark the position of the holes onto the paper. Then mark the centre of each hole with a pen

4 Holes for the hardware were drilled out to the required sizes and then labelled front and rear

Not long after I had first started playing guitar, I took the semi-solid I was playing at the time to a local luthier to ask him how much it would cost to replace the dodgy output socket. "It won't cost you a thing," he replied. When I asked why, he answered, "because I'm not bloody doing it".

He told me rewiring a semi-solid electric was one of the most difficult and fiddly of all guitar repairs and something he hated doing. So I decided to do it myself and two weeks later, when I had finally managed to reassemble my guitar, I had to concede he had a point.

Since then, I've rewired a fair few ES-style guitars. It's still not a process I find particularly easy or enjoyable, but at least it doesn't take me two weeks anymore. Working on solidbody electrics is so much easier than semis, but there always comes a time when the urge to upgrade becomes irresistible – or unavoidable if the controls get so bad the guitar can't be used.

Both scenarios applied to Tom's guitar. He wanted new pickups installed to improve the sound, but the control potentiometers and switch had seen better days. When the time for keyhole guitar surgery on a semi comes around, it seems sensible to do the whole lot while you're in there.

Parts

Tom decided on a set of Creamery humbuckers – a Custom '59 in the bridge and a Baby '71 in the neck. In addition, Tom asked me to install new CTS 500K audio taper potentiometers, replace the jack socket, upgrade the tone capacitors and wire them 50s-style to the volume controls. Although they look like electrolytics, the ones I used are actually vintage-style paper oil types called Black Bees. We decided to retain the switch. Tom fancied a set of vintage-style tuners to improve the looks and make the headstock lighter. Creamery pickups can be bought directly from the manufacturer (www.creamery-pickups.co.uk), and all the other parts we used are available from Allparts UK (www.allparts.uk).

Strip down

Begin by removing the strings, tailpiece and bridge, along with the tuners and scratchplate. It helps to have a container on hand when you're stripping down a guitar – as each part comes off, it goes straight in the container. Being diligent is the best way to avoid losing parts.

Here, I should distinguish between semi-solids, of the ES-335 variety, and semi-acoustics, of the ES-330/Casino variety. The former have a solid block running through the centre of the body, but the latter are completely hollow. With the fully hollow ones, you can often pull the wiring through the bridge pickup hole.

Tom's Epiphone is a semi-solid, so the only option is to pull the wiring out through the treble-side F-hole. But before you start on a project such as this, try to look inside and locate the ground wire (1). With tune-o-matic-style bridges and tailpieces, the ground wire will probably lead off from the bridge area and may be soldered to the casing of one of the potentiometers.

When the pickups have metal braided wires, the earth wire is sometimes wrapped around the pickup wires and soldered in place. If the guitar has a Bigsby or trapeze tailpiece, the ground wire may pass through a hole in the tail block and be soldered or pressed against the tailpiece. Either way, the ground wire is important and must be reconnected later.

Before pulling everything apart, I pressed masking tape against the edges of the F-holes so the tape protected the finish from any sharp edges on the metal parts. You should surround the F-hole area with a protective covering. I use kitchen paper folded double and held in place with masking tape.

The nuts and washers were removed from the four potentiometers and the jack socket. Three-way toggle switches of this sort are held in position by a round nut, and getting them off using pliers risks scratching the top. Investing in the correct tool is money well spent, and I bought mine from Allparts UK.

All the parts were pushed down into the body and one by one they were pulled through the F-hole (2). Once the volume potentiometers were out of the guitar, I de-soldered the pickup wires and the ground wire. The pickup connections were snipped and the wiring was then removed from the guitar.

Hookup board

All the wiring for the new pots, switch and jack socket has to be done outside the guitar body. It's vital that you get the spacing of the parts correct, so the easiest method is to make a hookup board. Components can be mounted on the board in exactly the right positions while the soldering is being done. It's also wise to ensure that hot soldering irons spend as little time as possible in close proximity to the lacquer.

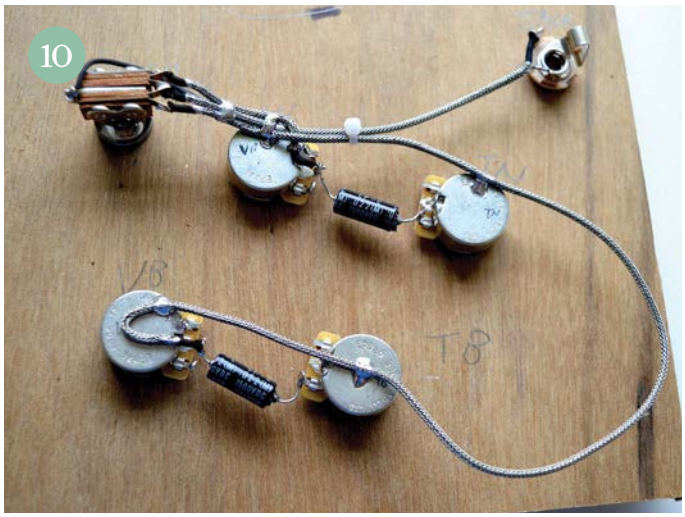
I placed a sheet of white A4 paper over all the holes then pressed down with my fingers to create impressions of the holes on the paper (3). After marking out the centre point of each hole with a black pen, I held the paper over a scrap piece of 5mm plywood and carefully tapped a nail through each pen mark to transfer the hole positions onto the wood. With a 3/8-inch bit, I drilled out the potentiometer and jack holes, and a step cutter was then used for the switch hole (4). Before mounting all the parts on the hookup board, >

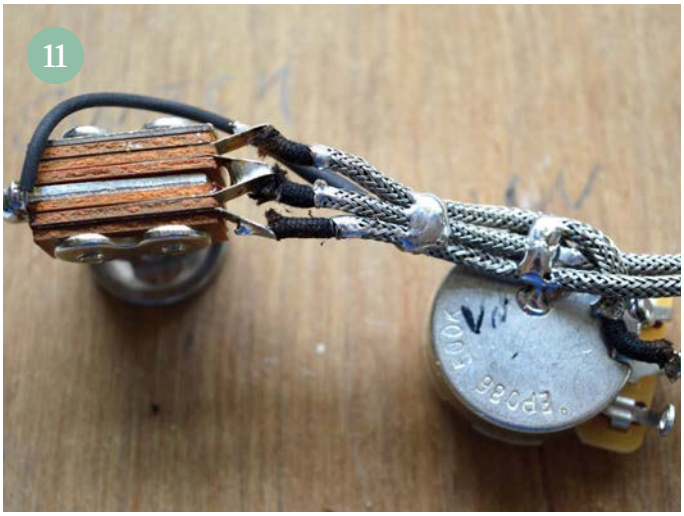
(5) Using a step cutter is a safer option and it's the best way to make really wide holes. Here, you can see masking tape being used to mark the stop point

(6) Here are the holes in the process of being widened. Note how the black ground wire is taped to the top of the body to stop it from falling back inside

(7) The jack socket, switch and all the potentiometers are mounted onto the hookup board

(8) Here are the components viewed from the rear of the board. Note how the solder tags of the potentiometers face each other





9 Start the soldering by making the four ground connections on the potentiometers and positioning the tone capacitors. The Black Bee paper/oil capacitors are only soldered to the tone pots

10 The wiring harness is complete. Note the long loop between the two tone pots on the right of the picture and the extra length of the capacitor leadout wires. Both help to make the installation easier

11 The Epiphone switch had a ground lug on the left. A ground wire was wrapped around all three braided wires to the right of the switch and soldered onto the braids and the switch itself

12 The jack socket and the neck tone potentiometer are about to go inside the body. Note the strings attached to the washer next to the jack socket. One string will be used to pull the socket into the body and the other will be used to pull the washer back out

don't forget to remove the locater tags from the potentiometers.

Widening the holes

Guitars manufactured in the Far East generally have components made to metric dimensions, but in the US everything is still imperial. The upshot was that the holes all needed to be enlarged in order for the CTS potentiometers and the Switchcraft jack socket we got from Allparts UK to fit.

Simply having a go at the existing holes with a 3/8-inch (or 10mm) drill bit could end in tears because there is a danger you will chip the finish around the holes. I prefer to use a step cutter bit, and after marking the stop point on the bit with masking tape I carefully widen the hole with the drill running at a fairly slow speed **5**.

The edges of the hole will taper and the potentiometer shafts may not push all the way through. To finish off, attach a regular 3/8-inch (10mm) drill bit and drill out the bottom of the hole. To avoid chip out on the underside, take care not to push down with the drill **6**.

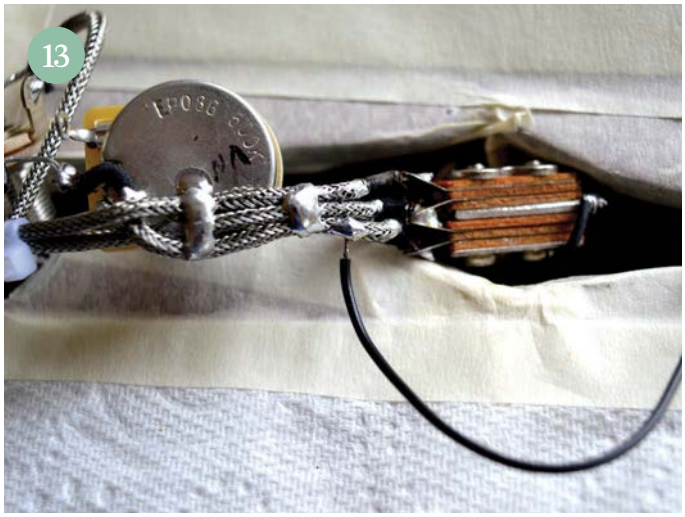
Hooking up

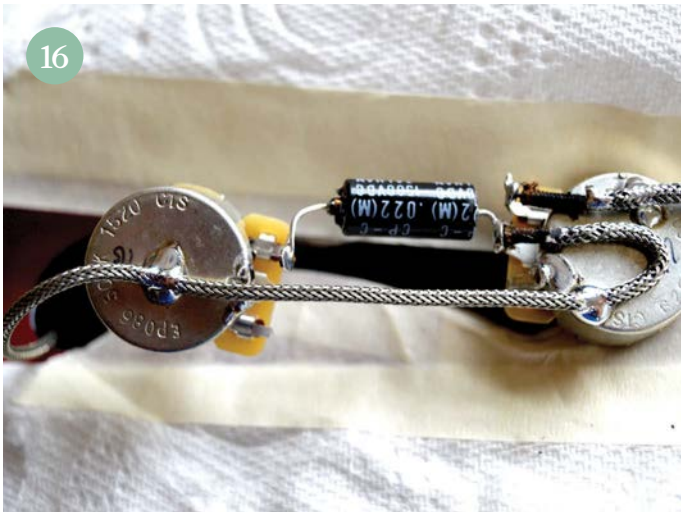
All the components were mounted on the hookup board and positioned for easy connections **7** & **8**. It makes sense to label the board and the potentiometers themselves so you know which is which. Everything is reversed because you are working from the back rather than the front. Download a wiring diagram, but take care if you're re-using the switch. The Far Eastern switch may have different connection tags to US ones.

I started out by bending the grounding tags on the potentiometers to touch the casings and soldered them together. Next, I connected the capacitors between the volume and tone pots **9**. The capacitors are connected to the centre tags of the volume controls, which is the way Gibson used to do it in the old days. I also left the leadout wires very slightly longer than they needed to be to allow some wiggle room in case the potentiometer shafts didn't quite line up with the holes.

The hardest part of the hookup is soldering the braided wire to the pot casings. To do this, you really need a powerful soldering iron, and I set mine to its maximum – 450 degrees. Follow the diagram carefully and feel free to use cable ties to hold things in position while you're soldering **10**.

Adjacent to the switch, a length of bare wire was wrapped around all three braided cables and soldered. Some heat shrink was slipped over the leadout and the other end was soldered to the switch ground lug **11**. I also allowed a longer than usual loop of wire between the two tone controls. My plan was to install the jack, both neck pickup controls





and the switch while both bridge pickup controls remained outside the body. I had tried the 'all at once' approach before and I figured this would be easier.

After checking all the connections by eye and testing them for continuity using a multimeter, I was pretty confident everything would work. At last, it was time to put everything back inside the guitar.

Re-installing the controls

Some people adopt the 'ship in a bottle' method and pass strings through each hole in the body. These are tied to the components then the strings are pulled to draw the pots, jack and switches through the holes. Rubber tubing is sometimes used, too. This might sound easy, but in my experience the strings tend to become tangled or fall off.

Instead, I used the string method only for the jack socket and the neck tone control. All the other parts are so close to the F-hole that you can use your fingers to position them. I pushed a length of solder wire through the jack socket hole and fished it out through the F-hole, tied some string to the solder wire and pulled the string back through the body then out of the jack hole.

The string was threaded through the jack socket and tied to a washer. A second length of string was also tied to the washer 12. I repeated the solder wire trick through the neck tone control hole and tied the string to the shaft of the tone pot.

The new neck pickup was placed in position and I fed its wire through the body and out of the F-hole. The jack socket and tone pot were pushed through the F-hole into the body, but I left the neck volume pot and switch outside. The ground wire was wrapped around the braided wire and soldered before I soldered the pickup wire to the volume pot 13.

After allowing everything to cool down, the neck volume pot and switch were passed into the body via the F-hole. The jack and tone control were pulled into postion and loosely held in place with their washers and nuts 14. You can usually push the volume control and switch through their holes using your fingers, but a thin screwdriver and long nose pliers can help, too. Once installed, they were also held in place by washers and bolts.

At this halfway point, the bridge volume and tone controls were still outside the body 15. The hookup process was repeated for the bridge pickup and both controls were then pushed inside and secured 16 and 17. I plugged in the guitar to test everything was working before tightening things up.

Tuner swap

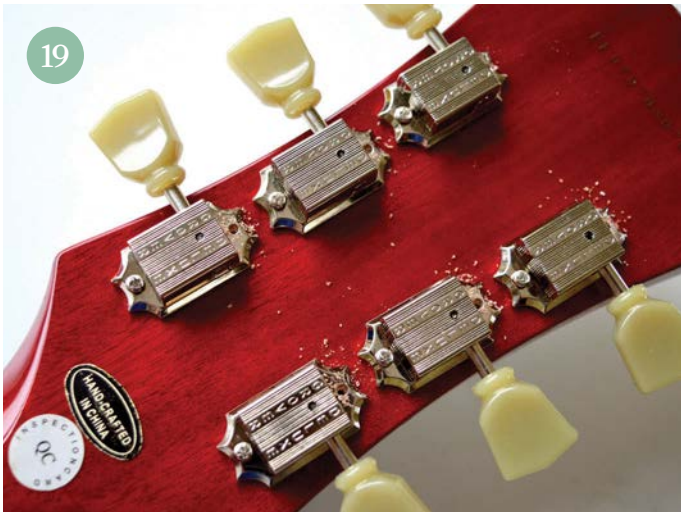
Compared to the rewiring, the tuner swap was effortless. The original

13 The ground wire is wrapped around the braided wires next to the switch just before the neck pickup is connected to its volume pot and the volume pot and switch are inserted through the F-hole

14 The jack socket and neck tone controls are in position and the nuts and washers are holding them in place but the strings are still in position. The neck volume pot and switch are about to be guided up into their holes

15 The neck volume pot and switch are not fixed in position but the bridge pickup control pots remain outside the body thanks to that long wire loop

16 The wire from the bridge pickup is soldered onto the volume pot and the controls are finally ready to go inside the body. When you are inserting the potentiometers, don't forget the knurled washers that will prevent them from spinning around



17 Everything's in. Don't forget to test it's all working before you tighten everything up and restring

18 The tuners are clamped in position with this bushing arrangement. Using the correct-sized socket is the best way to avoid scratching the metal plating and damaging your headstock

19 The bottom screw holes lined up with the original tuner screw holes, but pilot holes had to be drilled for the extra screws at the top

20 The new tuners look better and function more smoothly than the originals

kidney Grovers were removed by taking out the screws at the back of the headstock and using a socket wrench to undo the bushings.

Usually, vintage-style tuners require conversion bushes when they're being installed in place of die casts, but the Grovers Tom specified are vintage in looks only. They're actually 14:1 ratio die casts and they were direct replacements for the originals. Even the bottom screw holes more or less lined up.

I re-used the original screw holes and tightened the new bushings from the front 18. After drilling pilot holes, the upper screws for the new tuners were put in place and the job was complete 19 and 20. However, you could opt to use only the bottom screw holes if there's a possibility you might want to revert to the original tuners at some point.

Verdict

I can say from experience that installing a new wiring harness is easier than trying to re-install an old one. I feel this job went smoothly because I was able to restrict the number of pull strings to two so nothing got tangled up. Leaving a slightly longer than usual cable loop between the tone pots allowed me to install the controls in stages rather than all at once. As it turned out, this rewire and pickup installation was relatively straightforward. The key is to be methodical and remain calm when things get fiddly.

The new pickups represent a significant upgrade on the stock items – clarity is retained when you turn the volume controls down, and the tone controls have a nice gradual response. I like the tuners a lot, too. The guitar seems to have a much better balance than it did before and they feel more precise. All things considered, I think this Epiphone Dot project was well worth the effort, and hopefully Tom will too.

PARTS LIST & SUPPLIERS

- **Toggle switch box spanner (Allparts LT-4201-023)**
- **Creamery Custom '59 & Baby '71 Pickups** www.creamery-pickups.co.uk
- **4x 500K CTS audio taper split shaft potentiometers (Allparts EP-0086-000)**
- **2x 0.022uF Black Bee paper/oil capacitors (Allparts EP-4397-000)**
- **Braided hookup wire (Allparts GW-0837-000)**
- **Long shaft Switchcraft mono jack socket (Allparts EP-055L-000)**
- **Grover 135 Vintage 14:1 ratio tuners (Allparts TK-7940-001)**

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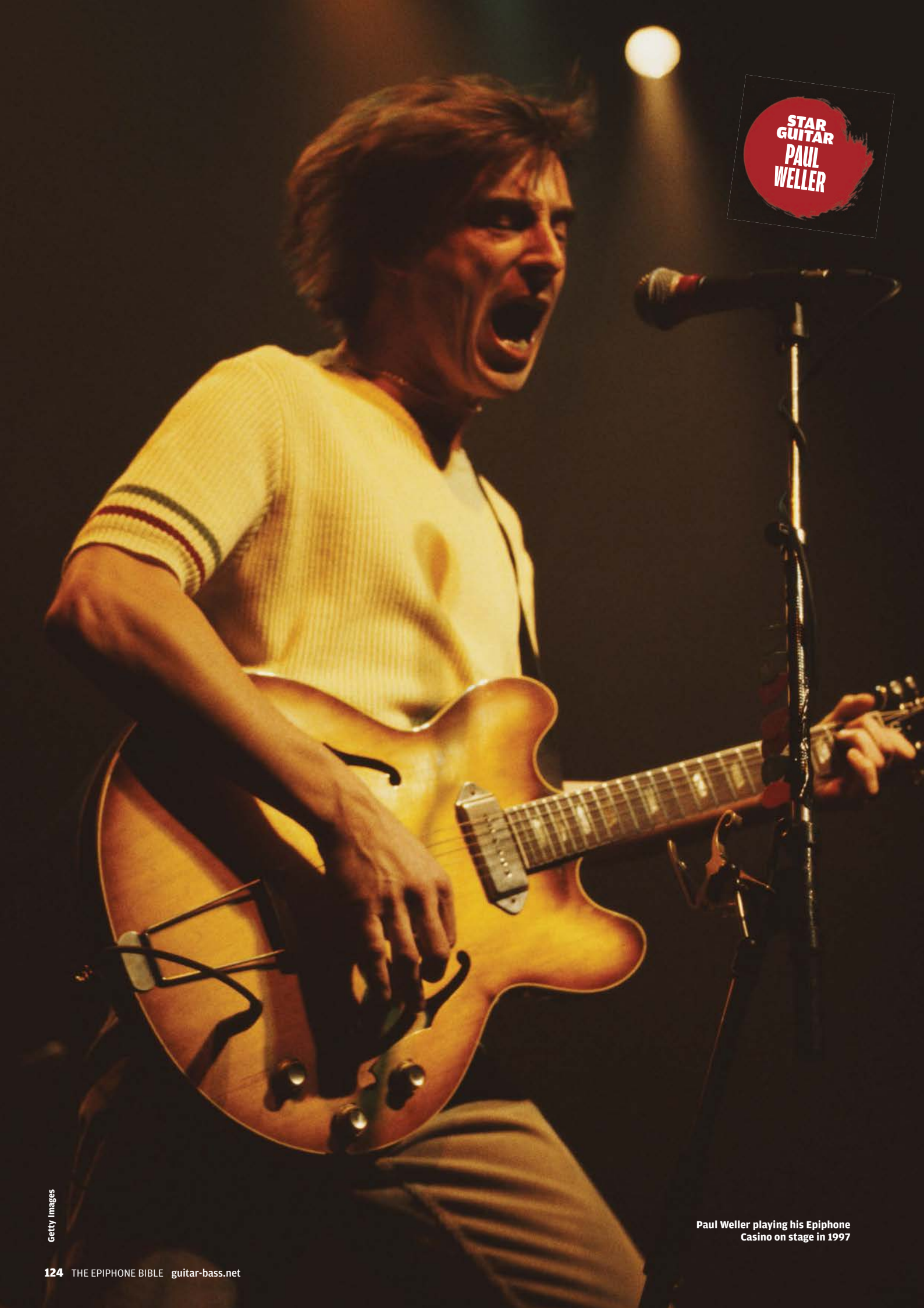

Getty Images

Paul Weller playing his Epiphone Casino on stage in 1997

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FACTFILE

All about... Mini Humbuckers

Mini humbuckers started appearing in Epiphone guitars before the company was taken over by Gibson. **HUW PRICE** tells the story of a little pickup with a distinct sound...

Here's a guitar-quiz question for you: besides being owned by the same company, what did the Gibsons and Epiphones of the early 1960s have in common? The answer is that many of them were fitted with PAF pickups.

You would be correct in thinking that none of the Epiphone models were equipped with the same full-sized PAF humbuckers fitted to top-of-the-range Gibsons. However, some Epiphones did come with mini PAFs that were also designed by the legendary Seth Lover. They even had 'Patent Applied For' decals on the baseplate.

Apparently, Lover had always felt that the full-sized PAF was somewhat bigger than it needed to be, and his mini-humbucker design actually predates Gibson's acquisition of Epiphone. Some of the first Epiphones with the mini humbuckers were the Sheraton and Sorrento models, and they later found their way onto the Riviera and Wilshire.

The mini-humbucker pickup design actually predates Gibson's acquisition of Epiphone

Had the mini humbucker remained exclusive to Epiphone, it may have been little more than a footnote in pickup history. Despite the undeniable quality of Epiphone guitars, the mini humbucker made its mark because Gibson began using them. At this point, it might be useful to make the distinction between Epiphone's mini humbuckers and the ones fitted to the Gibson Firebird when it was introduced in 1963. The construction is quite different, but we'll get on to that later.

Having dropped the initially unsuccessful Les Paul model by 1961, Gibson responded to popular demand from customers who were obsessed with the blues-rock tones of Bloomfield, Beck and Clapton. In 1968, the Les Paul was reintroduced... albeit with the 'wrong' pickups.

Bewildering as it may seem, Gibson decided to go with the earlier-style P-90s and proceeded to cut and rout a year's supply of Les Paul bodies. Pretty soon, it figured out that P-90s weren't what players of that era wanted, but the company deemed it too expensive to re-rout the bodies for full-sized humbuckers.

Jim Deurloo, who worked in Gibson's pattern shop, was told to figure out a solution to the Les Paul pickup issue that wouldn't require extensive woodworking or expense. Gibson had access to a plentiful supply of Epiphone mini humbuckers, and Deurloo realised they would fit into P-90 routs. A P-90-shaped cream ring was designed to fill up the gaps,

Epiphone's 50th Anniversary 1962 Sorrento features a pair of mini humbuckers

and from 1969, the Epiphone mini humbucker was the standard-issue pickup for the Les Paul Deluxe, until the model was dropped in 1982.

If you have ever heard a mini humbucker on record, it was probably residing in a Les Paul. Both Scott Gorham and Brian Robertson used them in Thin Lizzy, Pete Townshend used Les Paul Deluxes extensively during the 70s and Gary Rossington used mini humbuckers to cut many of Lynyrd Skynyrd's seminal tracks before his '69 Goldtop got pinched in '73.

Despite having played its part in creating some legendary guitar tones, the mini humbucker has been overshadowed somewhat by its big brother. So what are the differences between them?

How they're made

The mini humbucker family comprises three models – the Epiphone version, the closed-cover Firebird type and the Johnny Smith. They all measure 2 5/8-inch by 1 1/8-inch, but the construction differs. This article concerns mainly the Epiphone mini humbucker, and as it's the original version, it's unsurprising that its design is closer to full-sized PAFs than the others.

An alnico 5 bar magnet is placed beneath two coils wound with polyurethane-coated 42-gauge wire. The bobbins are made narrower to fit under the covers and one coil has adjustable ferrous polepieces that protrude through holes in the cover, while the other has a ferrous metal bar.

Firebird pickups have alnico 5 magnetic bars in both coils and closed covers. Johnny Smith types have a bar magnet in one coil and a steel bottom plate that's tapped and threaded for adjustable pole pieces. The magnetism passes from the bar magnet through the steel plate and up into the adjustable pole pieces that pass through the second coil.

Each mini-humbucker coil has around 4,250 turns of wire, and the combined DC resistance usually measures between 6k and 7k. So a hot mini humbucker just edges into the cooler end of the full-sized vintage PAF spectrum.

Sound

Mini humbuckers are known to produce a fairly high output, with extended treble response and a more open tone than a typical full-sized humbucker. Much like a Gretsch Filter'Tron, the reduced field senses string vibration over a shorter length, which produces a more focused and brighter sound.

While we tend to fixate on magnet types and DC resistance when discussing pickup specs, inductance is equally important and it's what makes the Epiphone mini humbuckers sound distinct from the Firebird type.

Alnico magnets and steel have different inductance properties, and the presence of the steel bar and polepieces in the Epiphone mini humbuckers increase inductance. This boosts output and fattens the bass, which gives mini humbuckers more sustain, smoothness and body than the weaker and brighter Firebird pickups. The magnetic field strength and shape is also different, which influences tone.

Epiphone mini humbuckers remain popular with jazz players and work superbly for blues and classic rock

Although they're not as fat and powerful as full-sized vintage-spec humbuckers, the Epiphone mini humbuckers sound sweet, clear and very articulate. They have remained popular with jazz players and work superbly for blues and classic rock.

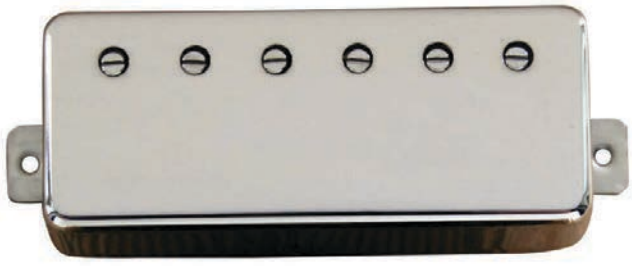
Modern players may also find that the inherent clarity, combined with their noise-cancelling attributes, makes mini humbuckers ideal partners for cranked-up, low-power valve amps, as well as pushing through effects-heavy signal chains. They have also started making more regular appearances on boutique guitars, so maybe this long-overlooked classic is beginning to find itself a new niche. Could the Epiphone mini humbucker be the new Gold Foil? Time will tell...

BUYER'S GUIDE

For such a niche pickup, it's surprising just how many manufacturers offer mini humbuckers with authentic vintage components, contemporary tweaks and various others options. Here are a few examples...

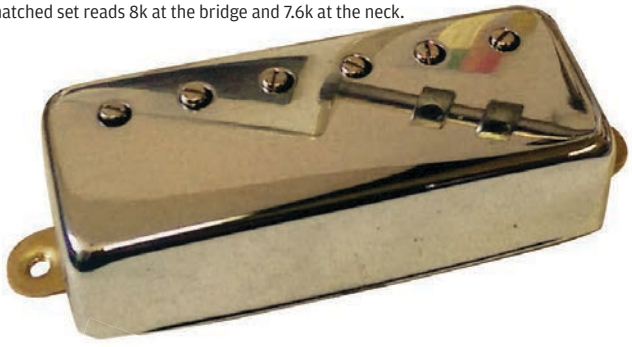
MOJO PICKUPS MINI-HUMBUCKER £70

Coils are hand-wound with 42 AWG wire and the magnet is vintage-spec alnico 5. Unlike some calibrated sets, both the neck and bridge fall within vintage spec at 6.2K and 7.2K respectively. You can even order a calibrated set of three.



HOUSE OF TONE SPECIAL MINI HUMBUCKER £70

Made in the UK, these mini humbuckers are wound to produce the bright mini humbucker sound with a fuller bottom end. They're available with chrome or gold covers and a choice of vintage outside braid wire or four-conductor hook up. A matched set reads 8k at the bridge and 7.6k at the neck.

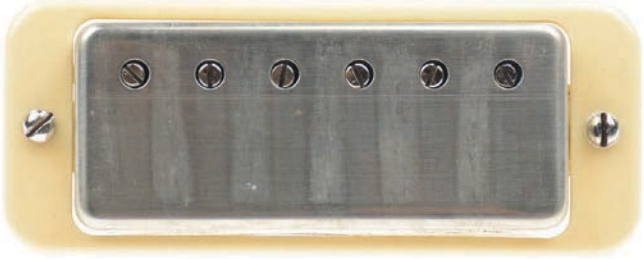


GIBSON ORIGINAL MINI HUMBUCKER £89

Yes, Gibson still makes them, but the magnet is now alnico 2 rather than alnico 5. It ships with a cream surround, and a DC resistance of 6.5K puts it into the 'medium' category for mini humbuckers.

SEYMOUR DUNCAN ANTIQUITY II ADJUSTABLE MINI HUMBUCKER £137

If you want a mini humbucker that looks vintage from the get-go, the Antiquity II version may be worth considering. The bridge version is wound to 8.1K, but if you prefer vintage specs, just order two of the 6.7K neck pickups.



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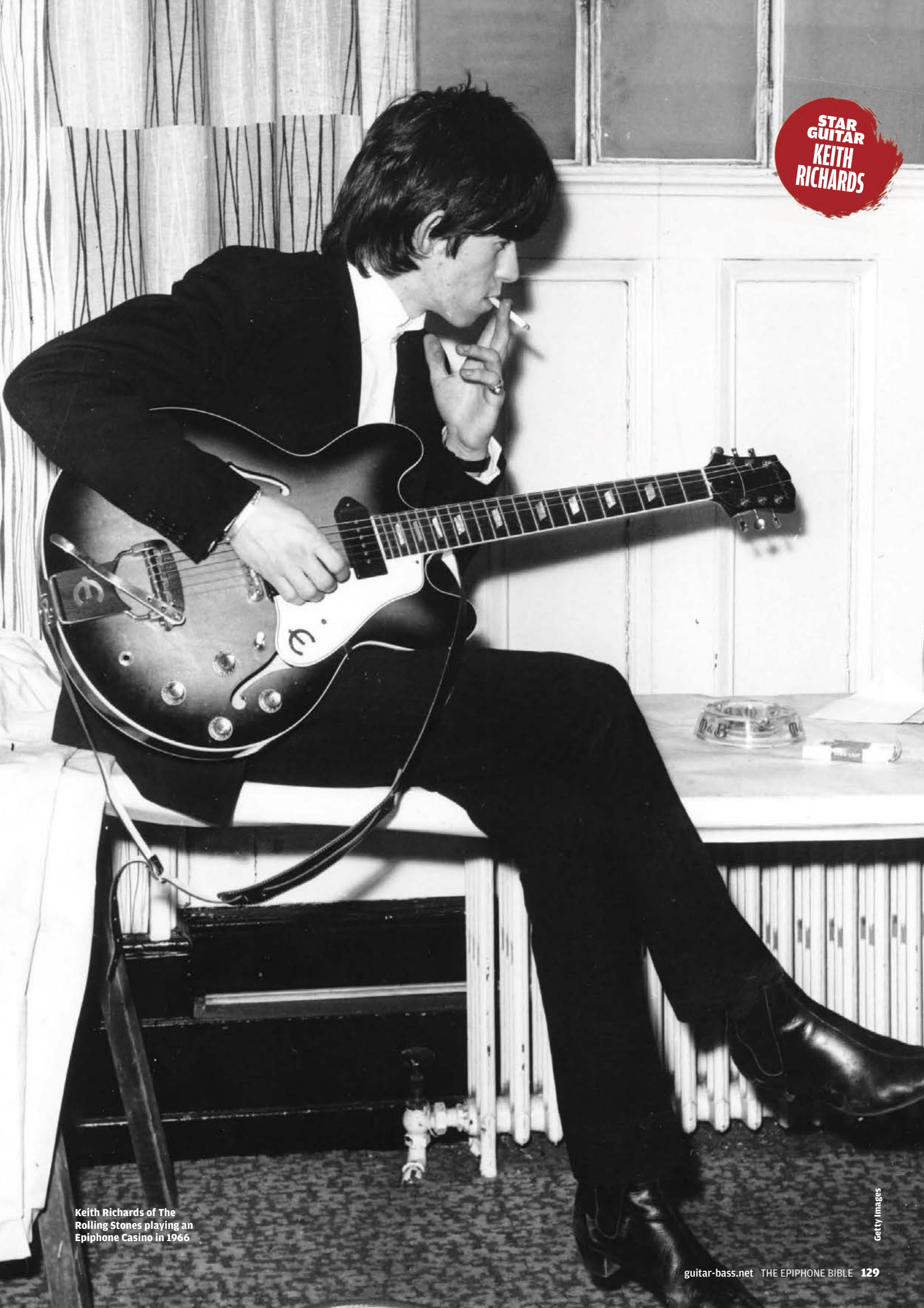

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KEITH RICHARDS

Keith Richards of The Rolling Stones playing an Epiphone Casino in 1966

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STAR GUITAR

THE EDGE

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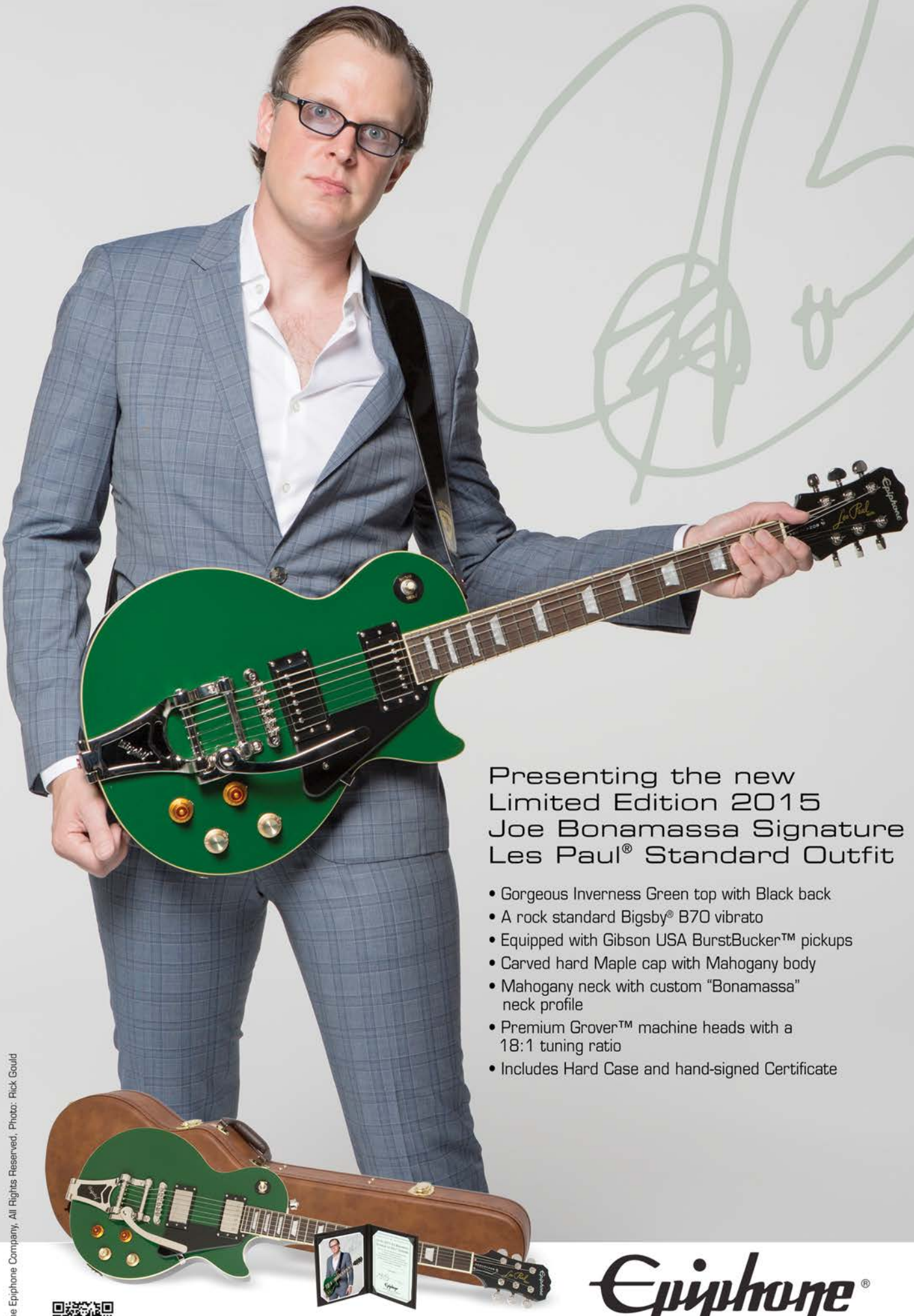
The Edge of U2 at Sam Boyd Stadium in Las Vegas in 2009, playing his 1962 Epiphone Casino



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